



**COMPROMISE ON TEACHER COMPETENCY ALONE RUINS
ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING : AN INTERVIEW WITH
Dr. P BHASKARAN NAIR**



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The job interview call for a teaching position specified that the subject that I should handle was Communicative English. I was supposed to take care of learners from KG to Class Eighth. Though literature is my favourite subject, I was happy to learn and teach the linguistic aspect of literature, too. After my interview they rang me up confirming my post as a teacher of Communicative English. I was told to interact with the tiny tots of L.K.G to the students of eighth standard. Regarding what I should do in the higher classes, say fifth to eighth standard, I had a vague idea and a broad framework. But I was brooding over what I should ‘teach’ in the KG and lower primary classes. I was advised by the authorities to simply be with them and do some basics like how to pronounce the alphabets, vowel and diphthongs, following the books prescribed.

It was not a rose paved path to grab the attention of these little ones through the Apps – Google meet and Whatsapp. Won’t the physical absence of the teacher affect the ward? The thought continuously haunted me till I got an audio from a little one wishing me “ ‘Good afternoon” . A day earlier, the same one had wished me jubilant “Gundasanonteacher”. Little ones always astonish us. While the elder

students get interrupted with their hesitation and fear over mistake tiny tots came out with myriads of imagination.

To break the ice I began engaging my students making them introduce and speak of themselves. This was done from the first standard to eighth standard. In KG classes I had to send videos through Whatsapp and should check their responses through their reply videos. There was a visible influence of mother tongue throughout their conversation, which can only be curtailed with full and deliberate effort. Confusion popped up yet again. Should I pause my children in between their speech and correct or let them continue open up their free flowing imagination?

Every issue will have a solution provided we should wait. Thus one fine morning I received an email from Dr. P. Bhaskaran Nair, a professor of English retired from Pondichery University. A memory-current of his class and concepts dribbled. I had no time and chance to drop down. As decided to snatch the better lot, I paused him with some questions. It was an interaction via e-mail.

My first concern was that normally when students were in the classroom or in the school the atmosphere they would be asked to speak in English (We may not impose it, but would rather suggest). But at present students are being locked up in their home for more than six months. How would it affect their English language competency.

He came out with an interesting explanation that the situation forces us to do something new or strange, and we have to oblige. When the whole world is forced to tread unfamiliar trails in strange lands, it must be treated as a cultural migration into alien lands. Here, for teachers, it happens to be technology. For some others, it may be some other area or field, which they never have thought of to inhabit in.

Therefore, let's get settled on the island, to which we have been washed ashore, he added. To survive, we have to adopt new modes of existence. Here, is what (i) ELT methodological awareness and (ii) the teacher's resourcefulness in combine can help us. Referring in particular to my dilemma, that is how to interact with the tiny tots in English who may be sitting comfortably on their mother's or grandma's knees. The solution suggested by him was, instead of a prescribed book, the resourceful teacher can convert life experience as teaching-learning experience. Example: In a rural set up: "Tell me which bird wakes up earlier—the crow or the cock?" In an urban set up: "Tell me, which runs faster—a car or a train?" In the syllabus, the topic may be, 'comparison'. In the textbook, there may be a few disconnected sentences to illustrate the comparative degree, As follows.

An elephant is larger than a lion.

A car is smaller than a bus.

A river is longer than a canal.

The sun is brighter than the moon.

Though the writer who wrote this textbook, the teacher who has been teaching it for years, or the parent who has been providing additional coaching to the KG kid has no problem with these sentences, the child has; just because the child has not grown enough to “exchange his or her common sense and intuition for bits and pieces of information that fetch marks, grades and ranks”. This is a barter system, which we call Indian education. Surrender your intuition, which the American transcendental philosopher RW Emerson valued as the greatest gift human beings possess, in addition pay some money; buy fragments of information which surely fetch you good career opportunities. This ridiculous system may find nothing wrong in the cluster of sentences lifted from an English reader or grammar book.

But the innocent, intuitive child is totally confused by the “violent yoking together” of the disjointed fragments: elephant, car, river and the sun.

Dr. Nair continued: “Do you know that what most of the grammar books and textbooks are supplying is ‘useless’ English? English which is not used while one functions in English. Look at the example of the comparative degree of adjectives and adverbs. You people teach: *big – bigger – biggest, long – longer – longest, good – better – best, and so on.* But, do you use them as such while communicating in English? Does the word ‘longer’ exist alone or does it more or less take the word ‘than’ after it? Does ‘best’ exist alone, or should it be preceded by ‘the’? then why don’t you teach the right collocation (not individual words)? Words may exist in isolation in dictionary; but in ‘use’ or while ‘functioning’ they need companions to go with them. Words collocate. Language functions as words in collocation. From different parts of the lexicon, we collect six words and then collocate to form a meaningful chunk to function: *in the corner of the room.* You got a meaning, you got a picture of a room and its corner. Imagine you are a child in the first year of English. Do you get this picture when your teacher gave the dictation of these words, one by one, as follows—*the, in, corner, room, of.* Teaching words in isolation is absurd, waste.

He added: You may begin with real life, and then move to the textbook, only to come back again to life. That is English communication—NOT answering the questions given at the end of each unit.

The line below flashed through my mind the moment I began to think on English language:

“Don’t write in English, they said, English is not your mother –tongue”

“Introduction”, Kamala Das

Yes, English is not our mother tongue but we should be able to follow the language as the era demands it. Leave aside the perfection at first, but the language should be there at the tip of our tongue. For that as the teachers of English language one should not depend on the prescribed text book is what the opinion of this adept.

True is what his words. Teachers should be able to incorporate myriads of life brimming experience to impart the concepts. Elicitation of the concept is more important than describing them a concept.

To tackle the present situation, teachers are following Google class room or Zoom App class at this time. On asking how this would enable the ward to improve the language or at least sustain the competency they had, he views thus.

Technology is going to stay—thanks to Covid. Not because of its merits, or because teachers are good at it. It saves money for the managements and government. In the place of four teachers one teacher will do in the post-pandemic classrooms. Three will be thrown out.

Hopefully this worst situation will end soon. When the school reopens English classroom (that is my prime concern) may follow the old method without much ICT techniques. As a passionate observer of the language class my doubt revolved around its effect on the children. The stalwart observes that old method, as such cannot be followed because of the money reason mentioned above. Moreover, by next year both parents and children have a fairly good idea about the advantages of technology. Those teachers who are good at both teaching and technology will survive in the classroom. (I mean, students like their classes.) But who will retain the job, who will be thrown out—depends on many other factors, you can guess.

This warns, cautious the upcoming teachers to be updated always with stacks of technologies. You can't escape excusing, "Technology is not my cup of tea". It is high time we bid farewell to this notion. Forget not we do live in a world of virtual reality. Dr. Nair continues on how the teacher can sustain the interest of the students. According to him, there are three key factors to be a successful teacher of English: The first is the teacher's communication skills (not reading and paraphrase, but the ability to communicate without and beyond textbooks). Secondly, methodological awareness—current developments and the old ones too. For that you have to update yourself by joining new, useful courses, online. Read a lot. Thirdly, high resourcefulness—the ability to quickly change from one mode of teaching to another, the ability to trace/produce interesting materials, the ability to produce **surprise** in the class, every now and then.

In order to sustain the interest how about the introduction of cartoons in the primary classes, especially English cartoons?

Any film –regional language or English—can be a very good resource for ELT. But, a careful use. Watch an interesting part of regional language film, and let a discussion follow in English. At the lowest level, the focus is just on characters and events; at the higher level, let it be interpretative in nature. Straight away dragging children to English films may be counter-productive. Too much of anything is harmful. So it would be good if the parents and teachers too find time to sit with

the children to watch and enjoy the movies, keeping in mind the ultimate aim of the introduction of such film is the enhancement of language competency.

I shared my anguish with Dr. Bhaskaran Nair. Teaching in the elementary level is not an effortless, straight forward undertaking. But age proves that basic level teachers will remain unaccounted. Even in the case of 'anganvadi' teachers they are loaded with bundle of works. When do they find quality time to be with children? Either they should be unburdened with other activities and allow them to be with the children or they should be given proper assistants, at least one more assistant teacher to help and report other activities. In some cases more than fifty per cent of teachers would remain passive out, but would shine bright in their class. What if the teachers in the primary level given special training in using the English language too?

To this inquiry, the doyen came out with a befitting reply that not only primary teachers, teachers of English at all levels—KG to PG—need intensive periodic training. Every three years, there should be exam for teachers, based on theory and practice. The contents of the syllabus and the modes of testing teachers can be discussed on the right platforms; but the objective is to enhance teacher competency and to weed out incompetency. If below average is the performance of a candidate, one or two more chances may be given for improvement. An incompetent teacher of English is a cancer on the body of the society. He or she ruins the future of the student, hopes of a family, the economy of a nation, since English is the language of opportunity. Only a very strict, 'faceless' and unsympathetic attitude towards ESL teacher competency alone can save Indian ELT, the student community, the parent community, and the society at large.

A picture of George Bernard Shaw is what I could see when we had our email interview. He was sharp and befitting.

No one can keep away from the development of technology at present. The pandemic in fact made everyone keep their pace with the speed of light and wind. The idea of a language class supported with technology dates back to years. But the reality of term examination, finishing of the portions in stipulated time never let the teachers to part their time for other area unless demanded by the text book portions. But now the scenario has changed. The senior teacher also agrees with almost the same idea. Even when the school reopens every teacher would have to follow the class incorporating technology in the class as in his own style from KG to PG.

Dr. Bhaskaran Nair strongly argues that higher salary and increment should not be based on the classes we teach, nor on the basis of paper qualifications(which these days, anyone can 'buy' at some 'pay and use' educational institutions). Remuneration must be based on performance; not paper qualification. An excellent

school teacher must be paid better than a 'name sake professor' who reads out questions and answers from a bazaar guide (in olden times) or download online, as is the current mode of survival.

My next question was on 'correct English or standard English' which has been being discussed around the globe. Writers like Ngugi dismiss English for "english" and for native language. Many still write in this language to share a public sphere. Since the world is connected through this language, or as many relay on this language for their communication it is a debatable issue, whether one should have the access to this language or not. Should one follow the Standard English then becomes a concern. Normally it is said that people from various regions within India speak different variety of English. True. After all the need of language lies in the communication of ideas. If people can transport their ideas with the vehicle they have, is there any problem?

Dr. Bhaskaran Nair views that during his school and college days--1960s and 70s--the influence of mother tongue was seen as derogatory. Research in Contrastive Linguistics influenced theories of Applied Linguistics in general, and ESL teaching in particular. As years elapsed, the concept and perception on this issue underwent changes and now it is not an issue if mother-tongue creeps in to English language. "Abrogation" and "appropriation" is a way of concreting the identity. While considering the concept of "standard English" two concepts are to be noted, opines the senior teacher. One is 'accuracy' and the other is 'fluency'.

According to him if the teacher focuses more on the accuracy of the language it will mar the interest of the students in speaking out. Inhibition, shyness, withdrawal, sense of inferiority will be the result. But grammatical accuracy should also be taken in to account. He added, 'therefore, whatever may be the mother tongue influence in pronunciation, let children speak without fear. When they are free, in the course of speech they will be picking up accuracy by listening to others.' The most important factor is, he underlines is to provide enough English to listen to—the English of above-average quality.

To sum up, the important factor is the input or exposure. Unless the input is good, we cannot demand a fair output. Mere insisting on the accurate English is not the duty of the teachers of English. One should be able to crack the romantic idea of teaching learning methods and have to tailor one's own method to impart the concepts. There is no second opinion that every teacher in return should be motivated with a fair remuneration, good and effective training sessions, personality development talks, some healthy competition like , the best teacher of the month (purely on the basis of merits and effective works done by the teacher), some refreshing trips, recreation activities with fun. As the teacher gets ignited, that will reflect among the children too.

“The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone”

“Introduction”, Kamala Das.

Let our children speak with whatever they have, let them begin first, the rest will follow them. An environment which sufficiently provides the children with enough language input, assisted and guided by an efficient teacher will prove effective. Language learning is culture learning. Let our children speak many languages, write in many and dream in one, that of their choice – a bright future ahead.

