

# Standard Of English: Why Poor ?

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**I**N our country more than fifty per cent students either fail in English or do poorly at SSC, HSC and degree levels. Who is to be blamed ?

It is wrong to blame English for high percentage of failure, for we do not blame the other subjects even though the percentage of failure in them is no less glaring than that in English. The failure is not due to the fact that English is more difficult than all other subjects in the curriculum. In reality, the fault is with the methodology we follow to teach it. It is quite possible to obtain good results proportional to the expense of time and effort if we sincerely apply the modern methods and techniques of instruction.

The low standard of English was never an isolated phenomenon; it just a manifestation of the low standard of education in general. Student unrest, frequent strikes, adoption of unfair means, frustration among the educated unemployed, students-politics, low pecuniary condition of the people, very low teacher-pupil ratio, lack of proper facilities in educational institutions — all these factors produced adverse effects on education in general, as a result of which English deteriorated during the period of colonial rules — both British and Pakistani.

The indecision on the part of the authorities entrusted with the task of chalking out a language policy was responsible for the low standard of English. It was decided to replace English by our national language as medium of instruction. Once it was proposed that English should be taught as an optional subject.

It was also recommended that a commission to examine the question of complete switch-over from English to our national language should be set up. But nothing was done to implement the proposals and recommendations. As a result, the fate of English hung in the balance. Consequently uncertainty develops in the learners and an attitude of negligence towards English. Therefore, graduates can hardly write or speak English as per our expectation.

At present there are some major causes of low standard of English. These need attention of the teacher

and others concerned.

The motivation that facilitates the process of learning is awfully lacking among students of all ages. They are under the impression that they are not able to write letters, applications, etc. in English. They also think that they are not going to speak English in their daily life. In fact, they do not feel the need for learning this subject.

The low standard of English may be partly ascribed to the unfavourable home environment. A large number of students are drawn from homes having no educational background. The horizon of the world of these students is very limited. They do not see their near ones reading English newspapers or magazines; nor do they hear them speaking English; or get any help to learn English. These homes cannot even provide them with a minimum opportunity to have practice in what they have learnt at schools. They may depend on tutors, but it is seldom realized whether the tutors have the English background to teach. Private tutors preparing pupils' task at home make students suffer at every stage.

The lack of audio-visual aids account for the low standard of achievement in English in our country. Regrettably, most, if not all, English medium schools are not equipped to impart teaching with modern techniques.

These aids bring a foreign language to life because they apply to the sense organs of the learners and as such create tremendous interest in them and easily capture their attention. Unfortunately, our schools are wanting in such useful aids as flannel-board, charts, tape-recorder, films, radio and television. Aids like coloured chalk, blackboard, pictures and objects available in almost all schools are hardly used. The teaching of English without these aids is tantamount to showing colours to a man who is blind from birth. Naturally the result is unsatisfactory; what the teacher says in the classroom goes in at the one ear and out at the other leaving little impress-

ion upon the learner's mind.

A language is the product of a particular culture, and it reflects that culture of the people. English culture is different from ours. The culture difference is reflected in the language, and give rise to difficulties in learning English. This indeed is not a problem without solution. But unfortunately serious attention is seldom, if ever, paid to it.

The low standard of English is due to some difficulties inherent in the learning of a foreign language. English is a foreign language. Every learner of a new language, is preconditioned by the nature of the structure of his speech. The Bengali child learning English has no escape from the effects of this preconditioning. The reason is not far to seek. By the time a child comes to school, he has learnt to use his mother tongue spontaneously in spoken form and as such established his unreflective native language habits. And in learning English what he is required to do first is to develop a new set of language habits against a background of his native language habits; but it is not so easy a task for in doing so he meets more often by the interference from this mother tongue habits.

For a Bengali-speaking child the first language habits create mainly two types of difficulty (a) difficulty in pronunciation and (b) difficulty in mastering sentence patterns. Of these difficulties the more significant is the latter so far as the grammatical construction is concerned; and it is caused by the differences in the sentence patterns of the languages — English, a foreign language and Bengali, the mother tongue of the young learner.

The difficulties created by the first language habits and difference in the sentence patterns on English and Bengali should be known to the teacher of English, but what is strange is that while teaching English, he is oblivious.

Of all the causes of low standard the most important is the faulty method of teaching English. Most of

the teachers who teach English in lower classes do not follow any progressive method. The method they actually follow is ineffective, uneconomic and faulty because they emphasize the importance of reading and writing and neglect fluency in speech. It goes against the psychological principle that one learns a language first by speaking it. When the children come to secondary schools, they have fully developed the habit of cramming and parrot-learning and lost all interest in the subject. They continue to study English simply because it is included in the curriculum. Most schools don't ensure speaking English not even in English class.

The teaching often is far from satisfactory at secondary schools. Most of these schools are staffed with under qualified and untrained teachers who are not conversant with modern methods and techniques of instruction. They follow the traditional Grammar — Translation Method beset with grammatical rules. Thus grammar becomes a complex; English grammar, and not the English language, is taught. It does not develop in the learners a language sense, nor does it help them to master even a few sentence patterns, not does it interest the young learners. It simply helps the habit of cramming. Of course the present examination system encourages cramming which is a great help to those who can make speculation. This is frustrating at higher level, and damaging in the long run.

Let us, as above, prescribe a few remedial measures. We should not forget that it is not possible for the teacher of English to get rid of all the difficulties he is confronted with/without the co-operation from all concerned. He has, little or nothing to do with the improvement of home environment. He cannot change the existing socio-economic structure. He cannot afford costly teaching aids either. In spite of these difficulties, the teacher may find a way to raise the standard of English.

(To be continued)