

Teaching English Communication to Non-English Medium School Students: A Learning  
Experience

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the experience of a group of college teachers who have been voluntarily teaching English communication to vernacular medium students in rural areas of Sivasagar district in Assam, India at their leisure time. The standard of the students varied from class IX to class XII. During the exercise of more than two years, it was found that a majority of the students lacked confidence in English communication. The ‘pull of the mother tongue’ was obvious which largely affected their pronunciation and natural flow of the target language. They were also not very conversant with the common sentences and phrases used in daily conversation, which is basically for lack of motivation as well as exposure to English in their daily life. It was also found that most of the time the teachers had to make them ‘unlearn’ few basic concepts of grammar such as parts of speech, tense, concord, and sentence structure etc in order to make them effectively ‘learn’ English communication. When we examine the teaching-learning situation in the Indian context, we see that both the learners and teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) usually have monolingual background – say for example, Assamese in the state of Assam. As teachers-facilitators of the teaching group, we took it as an advantage and used the common language, that is, Assamese as a ‘facilitating language’ to make the learning process easier. It was found that the mother tongue or the common language can be used as a natural resource for learning the target language, and it is best suited for the purpose and learning can become a fun activity too.

*Keywords:* English communication, teaching, bilingual, facilitating language.

### **Teaching English Communication to Non-English Medium School Students: A Learning Experience**

**1.** We normally consider learners from vernacular medium schools in rural areas as disadvantaged and below average in learning English communication in regard to their peers in English-medium schools in urban areas. With this hypothesis in mind, we, a group of five teachers of English at undergraduate level, decided to team up to teach English communication to groups of non-English medium school students of classes IX to XII in our nearby rural areas at our leisure time.

Hence this paper is based on our first-hand experience garnered from this venture, which we started in July, 2016. For our activity we chose Disangmukh area, some 13 km from the district Headquarter of Sivasagar in upper Assam. Our objective in choosing this particular rural area comprising of seven villages was not only to see improvement in English communication skill in the target groups, but also to facilitate gainful employment for them in their own area, as with its Nature's bounty Disangmukh has huge potential of becoming a tourism hub in future.

**2.** In 2016, we started our venture with a target group of 32-35 students ranging from classes IX to XII, studying in the schools of Desangmukh area. Before actually teaching them we had the notion, and it is true that they had the exposure to English for some 8-11 years. However, our interaction during teaching with the target group made us realise that certain knowledge of language skills needed to be imparted which would eventually help them improve their communicative abilities. With this aim in mind and the objective already stated we started our teaching programme.

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M. A. K. Halliday (Halliday 254) says that “Teaching a language involves conjoining two essential features: first, the learner must experience the language being used in meaningful ways, either in its spoken or written form; and secondly, the learner must himself have the opportunity of performing, of trying out his own skills, of making mistakes and being corrected. Those are the essence of language learning”. To have a fair idea of their level of communicative abilities and make them experience the language to be used, we first started with simple conversation in English. During the exercise we found out that a majority of students lacked confidence to speak. Along with that they also lacked basic pronunciation skills as well as fluency. They could not, in most of the times, frame and deliver a complete sentence. On testing their reading and writing skills, it was seen that they fared better in these two skills albeit with certain amount of shortcomings in pronunciation and spellings of difficult words. This validates the fact that in teaching English communication to the target group our focus area should be on speaking skill.

**3.** During the schedule of teaching and learning, the target group was allowed to speak on any one topic of their choice in English, and we noticed that they tried to carry on but when failed in their attempt they code switched to Assamese (L1). When they did not seem to know the pronunciation of a particular word, their spontaneity got stuck and free flow of English did not take place. In controlled conversational practice where basic conversational chunks were used, they were able to respond well in the form of short answers to close-ended questions. In this juncture, we thought of a plan of how we could incorporate and make better use of our personal experiences into the schema of teaching to the target group, as we learners of English ourselves during our student days had different experience. Both the researchers have come from

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Assamese medium background, and started learning English through grammar- translation method only. The rules of grammar as well as sentence structure drills had been of great help in making sentences for conversational purpose, which in turn helped them develop their speaking skill. Thus the background knowledge of English grammar helped us communicate in the target language with confidence. In due course of time in the process of learning we tried to internalize rules of grammar and fit them in our daily conversation. And we checked them again with the help of language in context. In this regard mention must be made of different opinions regarding the teaching of grammar in an ESL/EFL classroom. For many, knowledge of grammar is essential for learning a language, but even though grammar need not be taught in the classroom. L. Newmark says that “The important point is that the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language” (Newmark 165). Whatever the argument is, grammar supplies a linguistic base in the learning of a language and learners need to be aware of the fact. Since second language or foreign language learning like English does not have an ideal environment in the classroom where they can intuitively pick up the niceties of the structure of English, it is imperative to focus our teaching to the basics of grammar. And in our case this proved to be rewarding. Then in our situation where mostly bilingual method was used, translation or use of mother tongue in the teaching of English was considered normal. Dodson’s bilingual method also allows the use of mother tongue in the class in stages (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy 44). As learners of English as a second language, both the researchers engaged in a lot of listening activities too during their student days, be it in the classroom, talking to seniors or taking help from the radio. This exercise paid off in long run as we ourselves got motivated to speak like the source-speakers, whom we considered our model.

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And therefore, taking our personal experience as the guiding principle in the same context of vernacular background, we initiated the grammar-translation method in our venture, though we were aware of many of its drawbacks like accuracy in translating words and expressions and that there were many other direct language teaching methods available. In the whole process controlled use of the common language, that is, Assamese as facilitating language helped them clear doubts and encouraged them to take part in English communication practice in a comfortable environment. After a period of few months, we saw marked improvement on the part of the target group in respect of their communicative performance. Some of the observations are noted below:

- i. Students were able to make complete sentences
- ii. Now they became confident and interested in engaged and focused conversation.
- iii. A few of the students of the target group were observed to have improved in their use of sentences in real time situations.
- iv. Code switching to L1 (Assamese) had decreased to a great extent. Instead of using Assamese they were observed preferring certain English synonyms. This indicates improvement of their motivation level and also vocabulary.
- v. Their interest in listening activity also enhanced to a great extent. They now seemed to be more inclined to listen to dedicated English news programmes on radio or television.
- vi. The whole exercise also led to the improvement of their pronunciation of certain words which were commonly used in their conversation.

4. With these observations in sight, we propose the following measures, which can be adopted

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by the English teachers in a similar situation.

- i. The target students should be well informed about the aim and objectives of English education in the school curriculum. They must also be made aware of when to use their mother tongue, that is, when mother tongue is permissible and when not. Teachers should set clear guidelines about the code switching in conversations. Teachers' own adherence to a kind of agreed code of conduct will be vital in this regard.
- ii. English teachers can choose appropriate tasks that the non-English medium students, at their respective stages, are capable of performing in English. Challenging activities can be given to keep them engaged.
- iii. Listening activity must be encouraged for their improvement in pronunciation of English words as well as for picking up a neutral/natural English accent.
- iv. Persuasion and other inducements from the English teachers can help students feel the importance of speaking. Inside the classroom motivational or persuasion phrases/words like, 'Please speak in English!' or 'Stop using Assamese/ Hindi' etc. often works. This really brings colour to the classroom atmosphere and "students will go back to their activity with new determination" (Harmer 133).
- v. The mother tongue or the common language can be used as a natural resource for learning the target language. When used in innovative ways it can serve as the best facilitating tool by making the learners comfortable in the learning process.

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