

# **Sociocultural Influences on English Language Teaching**

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## **1.introduction**

This chapter explores on the importance of society and culture, and the role of these two in the teaching of English language. For educators and learners, it is essential to understand that how our culture, history, and the world today effect language learning. Through this exploration, we will come to know the sociocultural aspects that shape English language teaching. As English is a global language, it has crossed national borders, cultural boundaries and ultimately the teaching of English language is greatly influenced by sociocultural contexts wherever it is practiced. When we understand a language, it not only involves with its grammar and phonological aspects but also some of the other features of culture where we use that language. If the learners of language do not belong to same sociocultural background, definitely there will be many misunderstandings. As all the cultures have their own set of norms, the gap of communication which occurs among learners of multiple backgrounds has to be closed. Language and culture are always interrelated with each other and so as the learning of language and culture learning are also interdependent on one another. We cannot separate these two.

The evolution of language from the point of social identity is crucial, because the language choices of the native speakers cause the language changes. The social identity is defined by one of the most important factors that is the speaker's social class, as it is commonly known that the middle and higher class people interested to use standard English, as they wanted to be considered as the most prestigious people. For example, In India higher class and some middle class people do not pronounce the sound of the letter "r", while the others pronounce it. In few of the cases, people who want to exhibit their social status or as a member of particular groups, consciously select various forms of English language and this action is known as "social valuation".

When we come to learners, if the learners want to speak English well, they must think in that language as thoughts are very important for communication. If the learner wants to be fluent in English, first and foremost, they must understand culture and certain norms of English-speaking countries such as the Great Britain, USA, Australia, and New Zealand etc. A British and American cultures have their own set of value system, interpersonal relationships and environmental adaptations. But it is true that even after understanding of the culture of that particular language, it is not sure that whether the learner gets both the fluency and cultural knowledge or not.

Language transmits culture and preserves culture. Teaching English language is not only a process of instruction but also it is a dynamic exchange of knowledge, culture and heritage. Language is a part of society, so the teaching learning process of English language is deeply intertwined with the societies and cultures. The sociocultural factors influencing ELT show us a wide range of factors from historical contexts to multilingual contexts, globalization and the technological developments.

In this chapter, we will discuss different sociocultural influences and how they influence on English language teaching, which is aimed to provide an insightful and acceptable perspective for language learners, researchers, educators and anyone who is interested to learn a language. We will study this concept based on some historical, theoretical, practical evidences and some of the policies to understand how these influences effecting the experiences of both teachers and learners. The classroom practices, the digital realm, various student populations and the educational policies on English language teaching, with the help of all these, we will study how sociocultural factors affect every aspect of teaching learning process of English language. If we try to understand and recognize these influences, it enables us to know how these influences can empower effective teaching skills, culturally challenging and inclusive learning environments of the educators.

Let's start our journey into the sociocultural dimensions of teaching learning process of English language.

### **Section 1: Historical Perspectives**

Through colonization and when powerful countries such as the Great Britain and the United States spread their language, it made English language very rich and important. Today, this effect still continues its impact on how we teach English.

Over the time, English language teaching became more systematic and organized with the help of teacher associations and they designed materials and created rules based on culture.

The historical development of English language teaching shows us the clear picture of how sociocultural factors influenced ELT. From the early stages of ELT, by the sociocultural factors of that period, there was a great influence on methods of teaching languages. For example, the GTM (Grammar Translation Method) was very popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century which focussed on accuracy and literary language reflected the cultural values of that time. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, communicative approach replaced it and gained prominent place. It shows us the shift from strict way of learning language to communication and functional language use.

### **Section 2: Sociocultural theories**

The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and the theory of cultural and a Historical activity, these both had a prominent impact on English language teaching. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) in Vygotsky's theory provides us the importance of social interaction in the process of learning. Collaborative and interactive teaching approaches, what we see today are the result of this theory. The students or learners can actively engage with other peer group members to develop their communication skills through implementing collaborative and interactive approaches. In the same way the cultural and historical activity encourages the practices, the cultural tools which changes the learning of languages. These two theories have shown us the way for rich teaching approaches and more learned cantered approaches.

### **Section 3: Multilingualism and Multiculturalism**

The present ELT practices are characterised by diversity of learners because the learners are from different backgrounds (linguistically and culturally). Multilingualism and multiculturalism both these sociocultural aspects significantly influence English language teaching. In the classrooms where multiculturalism takes place, teachers must be aware of from which background the students are from and should act culturally sensitive. The understanding of different cultures, promoting greater appreciation and enriched learning experiences, all these are possible with the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives in the curriculum.

#### **Section 4: Globalization**

Now, the world became a global village and it has revolutionized the teaching of English language by giving the status to English language as a “global lingua franca”. It is an international link language. The demand for English language and its proficiency in international trade, travel, tourism and communication has skyrocketed. Due to this demand in sociocultural setting, many learners got motivated by this global demand of English language communication, many have concentrated on effective teaching-learning processes of English language to achieve the global challenges. Now, the term sociocultural context includes the concepts of intercultural competence, transcending borders and cultures in English language learning.

#### **Section 5: Technology and Digital Learning**

There is a drastic transformation in ELT through these digital technologies and even they reshaped the sociocultural dimensions of teaching and learning. The digital platforms like social media, digital resources, and internet made language learning more accessible and interactive. As English is an international link language, the learners can interconnect with worldwide English speakers through the present digital age by breaking down geographical boundaries. Teachers can implement new innovative strategies by utilizing these online platforms and resources to create an effective language teaching learning experience. AI technology helps the learners to learn the languages. The language translations can be done by AI tools to overcome the language barriers. AI- driven educational solutions have a great potential to bridge the educational gap and enable both teachers and learners to get an easy access.

#### **Section 6: Pedagogical Approaches**

The pedagogical approaches of ELT are significantly impacted by sociocultural influences. The approaches like collaborative approach, activity-based learning approaches, communicative approach, situational approach and the use of teaching learning materials like AV-aids, authentic materials of the real world focussed on real world communication and interaction. For the promotion of meaningful communication and to make the language learning more relevant to learners’ lives, the above-mentioned approaches consider sociocultural factors. Some examples are given below

1. Monolingual instruction:

Generally, the medium of instruction while teaching English language is predominantly monolingual, with little maintenance of students' native languages. It leads to a loss of cultural identity and diminished proficiency in the students' native language. Valuing students' native language and culture is very essential. Teachers must work on this challenge to solve this issue.

## 2. Over emphasis on Grammar and translation

There is an excessive focus on some of the traditional English language teaching methods such as Grammar translation method which focus on Grammar rules and translation. These rules may not effectively enable students' communication skills. This challenge needs to emphasize on other areas of language like speaking, listening, and real-world language use.

Some of the solutions are like

- > Bilingual and multilingual instruction
- > Task based language teaching
- > Inclusive curriculum development
- > Project based learning
- > Student centered learning
- > Collaborative learning and peer support

## **Section 7: Teacher and Learner identities**

In identifying and shaping teacher and learner identities, sociocultural factors played an immense role. In most of the schools, the classrooms are with students of multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and the learners will bring their cultures and identities into the classrooms which influences their language acquisition process. Teachers must respect and recognize these identities to promote a positive and inclusive environment for learning. Few challenges are as follows

### 1. Teacher cultural competence:

Some times teachers are with lack of cultural competence where this situation can lead to cultural misunderstandings and communication barriers with students who are from various backgrounds.

### 2. Student stereotyping:

Unintentionally some students and even teachers may stereotype students based on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This may lead to biases and treat them unequally. This can have an impact on students' confidence levels and motivation in English language learning.

### 3. Identity conflicts:

The learners who are from diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds may face conflicts between their native culture identity and an English-speaking context. In such cases there may be an identity crisis and affect their language learning experience.

## **Solutions:**

We may resolve these solutions by implementing the following

- Teacher training in cultural competence
- Culturally inclusive curriculum
- Promotion of multilingualism
- Diverse role models
- Individualized support
- Cross-culture communication skills

## **Section 8: Language policy and Planning**

The language policy maker and planning committees of different countries reflect sociocultural factors. The language policies generally are very complex because of the variety that they exhibit, especially the country like India. As India is a multilingual country, it's very difficult for the policy makers to make a language policy. Given a situation like this, it's very difficult task for the policy makers to decide on which of these languages should be the national language. These policies consider all the standards of language, variation and how they implement them for the education of language. The language policy and its sociocultural dimensions are very particular on deciding which languages are prioritized, the role of indigenous languages and the identification of linguistic diversity. Policies like that, can definitely affect language teaching and the development of materials for the teaching of language, involving with educators' awareness of these influences. In India policies like NPE -1968, NPE-1986, NCF-2005, NCFTE-2009, Three language formula by CIBE are working very prominently on making of language policies.

## **Section 9: Teacher professional development**

A newly born child does not remain a child forever. He has to grow in his life with multiple phases like infant to a teenager, then young adult to mature adult, and finally old person to till death. This is an inevitable process. In the same way in our professional life also, we require growth. Teachers or educators must have an updated knowledge of ongoing professional development to navigate the wide array of societal and cultural influences which impact English language teaching. For this we can include the development of cultural competence, understanding their learners' diverse needs and according to those requirements, how to adapt the teaching strategies. Pre-service and in-service training programmes and initiatives that foster cultural sensitivity and awareness are very crucial for educators promote collaborative, inclusive and effective way of language teaching. In some areas we can see the groups like "Teacher Development Groups- (TDG)". Generally, in our profession, we will come across with several issues. These are professional problems not personal problems. To sort out these issues, the best solution will be to get together and discuss in a particular organization. This we may name it as "Teacher Development Group- TDG". There are several places which have such kind of groups to resolve the professional problems.

We also can talk about an "Action research" here under this heading where we have eight steps process to help the educators to solve the professional problems in a systematic process.

It is a step taken towards self-development and many researches have shown the result that the teachers who are engaged in action research have become better teachers.

## **Section 10: Challenges and solutions**

It will be easy to understand and recognize the challenges that the educators face if we understand sociocultural influences in teaching English language. Teachers must focus on the issues like cultural misunderstandings, the variations in languages, and the requirement for inclusive education. These are very few issues here I mentioned but many more we have in reality. To resolve such kind of sociocultural issues and challenges we have solutions like teacher training programmes, the curriculum based on inclusive development, community-based activities must be included. Teachers can create more balanced and effective language learning environments by Emphasizing and addressing these challenges. Some of the problems are mentioned below

### **1. Cultural Bias in Materials:**

Teaching learning material for English language may have cultural bias which shows some irrelevant information to students from various backgrounds. This challenge demands selecting materials that are more inclusive. So, the teaching learning materials or resources must be suitable for the cultural context of the learner.

### **2. Teacher training and cultural competence:**

Addressing and understanding the cultural backgrounds and requirements of the students is a challenging task and it may lead to face some challenges. To solve this kind of issues planning comprehensive teacher training programmes which incorporate cultural competence.

### **3. Language Policy conflicts:**

Conflicts related to sociocultural and political sectors can create challenges for English language teaching. Some regions have conflicts where local languages and English language finding a balance by respecting both the local culture and the need of proficiency in English language is essential.

Thus, for such challenges mentioned above, we have solutions like

- Cultural exchange programmes
- Community involvements
- Flexible curriculum and assessment
- Technology and online resources
- Empowering local language teachers

## **Conclusion**

I conclude this concept with following few points. The sociocultural influences on teaching of English language are always diverse and ever-evolving process. These influences provide shape to the methods, approaches, language policies and policies which govern language education. As the change in the world is a continuous process, and become more interconnected

with technology, educators must focus on solutions to meet the learners' diverse needs from multicultures. By understanding and implementing sociocultural factors into teachers' teaching practices, they definitely can provide more effective and inclusive language classrooms that prepares learners for success in globally challenged world.

Financial considerations play a prominent role in shaping English language teaching, as the demand of English communications in the professional field driving language learning initiatives. The disparities in socioeconomic status can cause access gaps in quality of language education, later creating the complex role of sociocultural factors. The rules and regulations of the government policies include an extra layer of sociocultural influence as they follow the standards of the nation, curriculum, and the qualifications of the teacher. They reflect the real vision of the government for language education and its role in assisting national identity, economic growth and international collaborations.

So, in this context, the designers of curriculum, policy makers, and educators should be sensitive towards the sociocultural influences of English language teaching. Having thorough knowledge of these influences is must and should for the betterment of effective teaching strategies which are culturally responsive that monitors the unique needs and aspirations of learners in different sociocultural contexts.

The languages especially English language underwent and is still going through various changes, because of the interaction it has with other languages. These new changes considered as its further development and must be identified as a means of progress, which change the language according to the speakers' mentality.

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