

A three-pronged action for improving the flair of English among the students of new Afro-Arab & Asian universities

Dr. Chiramel Paul Jose

Professor of English, GEMS Arts & Science College, P.O. Kadungapuram, Malappuram, India.

Abstract

Some of the students in the affluent Arab-speaking countries as well as in the developing Afro-Asian countries, are willing to give due importance to English and cherish the ambition of travelling to England or America for higher studies. Surely there would be a change in the attitude of students and teachers to make the shift from monolingualism to bilingualism, when the whole set-up welcomes and supports such a change of viewing English as a Second Language and not merely a Foreign Language. If one expects high quality in improving the English flair of the students, the minimum steps such as compulsory adherence to English medium, availability of books in the library and a peaceful reading room for references, and a change of attitude both of the teachers and of the students are to be meticulously held on. The basic thing is that nothing is impossible, if we have the will.

Keywords: Flair of English, Monolingual teaching of English, Bilingual teaching of English, Attitudes of students & teachers, General atmosphere of English, Availability of library & reading room

Introduction

I would like to start these ruminations relying on three famous and relevant quotations: 1) "You can never understand one language until you understand at least two" (Geoffrey Willens, English author and journalist); 2) "Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe); and 3) "The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself" (Derek Walcott). Examining the language competency with relation to English Medium Instruction in Vietnam in a recent study, Le Duc Manh (2012) observes that students and teachers or lecturers have comparatively low proficiency in English issues while implementing English as the medium of instruction in Vietnam (265).

Having taught English in five different Universities in five Afro-Arab –Asian countries for the last thirty years, I have often deliberated on how to improve the efficacy of my pedagogical strategies to impart the knowledge of English to my students. This study might tend to make some comparative analysis with regard to the whole atmosphere in the Universities, the attitude of the students, the facilities offered to the students etc., which are never meant to be prejudiced against any of the University where I have worked and done my level best to impart wisdom and learning to the students. The comparisons are only meant to highlight into different aspects of the problem and to suggest solutions to tackle these hurdles. Much more than spending millions of dollars for the glorious external appearance of a University, such as having hectares of land available where a lot of clusters of fine-looking and glorious buildings are erected with all the modern amenities including the installation of smart boards in all the spacious class rooms, the focal attention should be given to getting all these facilities for enhancing the learning of all the students and the people around the universities.

The total atmosphere in the University

As everywhere in the World is the practice, the cream of the students may tend to get admitted in highly professional courses, and usually those who are not as proficient as the most brilliant students would be opting for the Courses in Arts & Humanities. There can be some exceptions to this assumption, of course. But, in fact, that is the case in general. No one can expect that these boys and girls would be highly proficient in English as their second language. Hence the very atmosphere in the University must be conducive to their striving at improving their English flair, especially when the field of their study is directly connected with English Language and Linguistics.

In Arba Minch University of Ethiopia as well as in College of Health Sciences under the Orotta University of Health Sciences at Asmara, Eritrea, there was a total insistence on using English as the medium of instruction as well as of official communications. It must be noted that the students of both these Universities were not the ones who selected Arts & Humanities as their field of study. They were either the engineering students or medical, pharmacy or nursing students. Although they were generally good in their English there were of course weak students in English Language but they were pushed to come up by providing them with a total atmosphere of English in the University. Although sometimes, the official announcements would be made bilingual (English and Amharic or Tigrinya), the focus was on improving the proficiency in English from the very start.

At the same time, in the College of Languages under Al Fateh University, Tripoli in Libya and in the Faculty of Foreign Languages in the College of Arts & Humanities at Al Baha University, Saudi Arabia this is not yet insisted on. Both these Universities hail from Arab speaking countries. The students in both these Universities cannot be identical with the Engineering students or Medical students. Evidently the level

of their English proficiency is far different. And it is then, the insistence must be strictly held on to creating an atmosphere of switching on to English rather than managing everything in the mother tongue Arabic itself. Quite regretfully, I remember during the four years of my service in the Al Baha University not only the administrative papers but also the academic announcements used to be always in Arabic and never in two languages (English & Arabic), which should have been a great impediment for encouraging the students familiar with a little bit of English, at least with reference to the academic needs. When this is quite earnestly practiced in the Department of Foreign Languages consisting of English and Arabic one is seriously led to doubt whether Arabic alone is the Foreign Language.

I always wonder why these two Universities in the Arab speaking world, does not insist on intently switching on to this language shift, at least when they offer courses related to English Language & Linguistics. I often feel that many of the students admitted to the B.A. degree in English Language & Linguistics step in to the University with the firm conviction that they can manage even without knowing to utter or write a single correct English sentence. This would not happen, in case, a minimum level of proficiency in English is insisted on even at the time of selection and admission. Moreover, once they are in the University with such a low level of English, and they never find anything in English, not even a single informative notice in English but find everything in Arabic, but for the Lectures given to them by highly qualified professors, how shall they be motivated to come up in English? Surely it would be counter-productive when such a practice goes on even in the Department of English.

To draw a case in comparison, as has been cited by Le Duc Manh in his commentary article, one of the recent investigatory studies from Danang University (2012) establishes that almost 70% of the newly enrolled students are not at all proficient to take up their studies in English. Students are incapable of comprehending the lectures or materials in English simply due to low English language competency. Concerning the Lecturers, but for those who have the education abroad, most of them show a low proficiency for verbally communicating in English. Even with regard to those who are educated abroad, some concerns about their proficiency levels, their ability to lecture at a level befitting for the students, and their interactions with students, are noticed conspicuously, although they appear to be good in English. Some Universities are under the impression that having a palatial building with classrooms furnished with smart boards and all, is everything that is needed for constituting a good university. The smart boards should be, of course, insisted on being used for the everyday lectures, for which facilities should be provided with. The availability of foreign teachers and installing smart boards in all the classrooms as a sign of glory or prestige alone would not facilitate the students learning English from them, unless and until the above concerns are effectively tackled with.

Simultaneously as spending so much of money to enable the services of highly qualified expatriate teachers, it is high time that the University might implement some basic changes in the atmosphere offered at least to the English students, for which this shift of language from Arabic to English would be crucial. It is also of supreme importance that the medium used in the classes and outside the classes must be English and then the

students will get automatically tuned to the flair of English Language. Undoubtedly within the first semester after implementing this, the results will show up. When I joined Al Baha University, students used to fetch an English-speaking class-mate friend when they came to talk to me, as I was not good in Arabic Language, but by and by the students learnt to adjust themselves with the requirements and boldly came to me and talked to me in English in the way they could as they were sure it was futile to speak Arabic to me and converse with me.

The attitude of the students and the lecturers

It is really a professional challenge to any good teacher to take up the mission of motivating and changing the attitude of deficient students in English language gradually to a friendly openness to English. Both in Ethiopia and Eritrea the students deem the value of education much more than the students of Arab-speaking world. They are fully conscious of how much money is being spent for their education by the United Nations' Development Fund. Accordingly they show a keen interest in taking benefit from all the lectures given to them by the efficient teachers. One cannot find the students of Ethiopia or Eritrea striving to skip the classes and escape the lectures.

Maybe due to the relatively higher economic stability enjoyed by the Arab-speaking students in comparison with the underdeveloped and economically unstable students of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the students of Tripoli and Al Baha seem to be tempted to show an easy-going approach to the college education. It requires a patient and time-consuming approach and drillings in getting these students more and more familiar with the English learnt at schools, and slowly and slowly eliciting the use of English from themselves. Convincing them that it is possible could be the first step. But if we continue with the trodden track as of during their school days, easily shifting to the dependence on the mother tongue Arabic even in English classes, the results will never show up. It is highly important that this drastic change happens in order to better motivate and induce the students to depend more and more on English, in everything academic in the University or College.

There are at least three important factors which must help the students and teachers have better attitudes towards English.

- 1) Bilingualism does not impose a cognitive burden and debilitate students' cognitive development. In contrast, as Baker & Jones (1998) affirm, psychological tests have shown that bilingual children are better in fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration in thinking than their monolingual counterparts (p.67).
- 2) The second element promoting EMI [English Medium Instruction] implementation is students' and teachers' positive attitudes towards English. The role of English's becoming increasingly "instrumental in this era of globalization for social, academic, and professional purposes would certainly stimulate both students and teachers to improve their proficiency in the language. This instrumental motivation is undoubtedly a valuable asset for successful language learning" (Jusuf Ibrahim, 2011, 123).
- 3) EMI provides more exposure to English and more chances to acquire it. Jusuf Ibrahim corroborates how the demand on students and teachers to read more text books in English during EMI, facilitates success in acquiring the language, and also highlights into the comprehensible

output or in other words the language produced by the learner (123 – 124). He affirms: “the opportunity to engage in meaningful oral exchanges (in the classroom or in the community) is also a factor necessary for second language acquisition, because it allows learners to test their hypotheses about their interlanguage system, receive feedback on it, and develop fluency and accuracy” (124).

As Yu-Ying Chang (2010) points out in the context of using English Medium Instruction even for subjects not directly connected with English language for Taiwanese students, a “major driving force behind this English-medium instruction policy is a common belief that teaching subject courses in English can promote students’ interest and motivation in learning the English language, and hence improve their proficiency, while at the same time facilitating their academic performance and increasing their competitiveness in the job market” (57-58).

The students must be made to love their learning hours in the College and avoid skipping the lectures for all the possible sham excuses. They should also be made conscious of the national money they are wasting, when they do not utilize the educational facilities rendered to them by the Kingdoms. This responsibility would definitely pave the way for their being earnest in improving their English and inculcating a desire for English proficiency in them.

The most interesting and observable fact about these students of the Arab-speaking countries is that they are well aware of their weakness in English and they really want to overcome this and come up, provided a good teacher is there, who resorts to English alone for communication. They do welcome the insistence of keeping the medium of instruction as English at least in the classes connected with English Literature and Linguistics. For the last five years of teaching the Arab-speaking students in Tripoli and Al Baha, I haven’t confronted with any problem in giving the lectures and lessons to them, although I never switch on to the medium of Arabic language while teaching courses on English. The feedback I gather from such students is that at the core they want to improve their proficiency in English and the students who opt for English Literature and Linguistics really wish to get imbibed with the spirit of English. This is my tribute to and testimony for my students of the Arab-speaking world.

Providing the students with a real Library and Reading Room for Reference Work

According to Manish Rajkumar, “A library is a treasure-house of knowledge. A well-stocked library is an asset to the school, college, university or the neighborhood. A library has a librarian to guide and attend to the readers”. My studies were enriched with the innumerable number of books which I had access to from the English Department’s Library and the General Library of my Alma-mater St. Thomas College, Thirissur which has now become an Autonomous College and various other libraries in India and abroad. Similarly, both in Ethiopia and Eritrea, in spite being economically very much underdeveloped, they do have a library as well as a Reading Room for the students to have access to the rare reference books and cope with the requirements of their curriculum. Quite in contrast with this support of the library and the reading room, neither in College of Languages at Al Fateh University in Tripoli nor in College of Arts & Humanities of Al Baha University, Saudi Arabia, strangely enough you

cannot find a library at all. Especially in the case of Saudi Arabia, I did keenly feel the absence of a good library, especially when I was supposed to teach the students at the Master’s level. I sought and sought for a library in the whole of the city and was very often directed by staff members and dignitaries to go to the Book shops. The plausible explanation would be the accessibility of SDL (Saudi Digital Library) to every student and staff. But I have my serious doubts from my own firsthand experience about the efficiency of this. Most of my students at the Master’s level also admitted the difficulty in coping with the needs without the lack of a library stacking at least a few hundreds of most necessary hard copies of the books.

Indeed, speaking about the American Indian Tribal schools Cheryl Duran (1991), has reported some 20 years ago: “Each tribal college deals daily with the reality that library and information resources are barely adequate to meet the needs of students... and [the] community” (400). But that was years ago and not comprehensible in the current world of 21st century. The predicament of the students in the two affluent and economically developed Arab-speaking countries is quite pathetic, because they do not have much access to their text books pertaining to the well delineated curricula.

George D. Kuh and Robert M. Gonyea (2003) started their report with this assertion: “It is hard to imagine a college without a library. A required stop on campus tours, the library is the physical manifestation of the core values and activities of academic life. The size of the collection is used as an indicator of academic quality. Though recent years have not necessarily been kind in terms of budget support, the library’s central role in the academic community is unquestioned.”(256).

In the International milieu many improvements are being introduced with regard to the concept of library itself, but all of it cannot be considered in a University where there is no library at all. As Geoffrey T Freeman (2005) has established: “The academic library as place holds a unique position on campus. No other building can so symbolically and physically represent the academic heart of an institution. If the library is to remain a dynamic life force, however, it must support the academic community in several new ways. Its space must flexibly accommodate evolving information technologies and their usage as well as become a “laboratory” for new ways of teaching and learning in a wired or wireless environment.”(9). Significantly, “the library must serve as the principal building on campus where one can truly experience and benefit from the centrality of an institution’s intellectual community.”(2)

One is left to wonder why some of the Universities in affluent Arab-speaking countries do not chalk out programs to provide with the facility of a good library for its staff and students, even before they draft out excellent syllabi and curriculum plans with regard to the courses they offer. It is highly probable that this paucity in giving due importance to library as the focal point where the students can accede to as many English books as possible can be linked to the viewing English as a foreign language alone. At least with regard to my present department which is called “Department of Foreign Languages” and where the only course offered is a B.A. in English Language & Literature, this becomes conspicuously evident. Due to the lack of a library and a reading room for reference, very often, in case a student gets some leisure hour due to the absence of a teacher for unavoidable reasons, the

student would be rather motivated to take his car and drive back home during the working day. Unless there is a class or lecture, there is nothing else to keep the student inside the campus. In the present era when the libraries pay much attention to text book affordability and try to supplement provision of text books as much as possible, no student would be willing to eat up the photocopied study materials alone during the leisure hours. Only when a peaceful and studious atmosphere is offered to the students, especially in the reading room, can one expect them to better the English standards. Otherwise it would be too much tasking for them and they will never wake up from the easy-going mentality of depending totally on the mother tongue and coming up with something like 'Arabglisch'.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, at least some of the students in the affluent Arab-speaking countries are willing to give due importance to English and cherish the ambition of travelling to England or America for higher studies. Surely there would be a change in the attitude of students and teachers to make the shift from monolingualism to bilingualism, when the whole set-up welcomes and supports such a change of viewing English as a Second Language and not merely a Foreign Language. If one expects high quality in improving the English flair of the students, the minimum steps such as compulsory adherence to English medium, availability of books in the library and a peaceful reading room for references, and a change of attitude both of the teachers and of the students are to be meticulously held on. The basic thing is that nothing is impossible, if we have the will. The students should be motivated with the wishful but winnable slogan of Barrack Obama: "Yes, we can!" In the erudite words of Frank Smith, "One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way".

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