



Teaching English as a Second Language in India: Concepts, Challenges, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

English has emerged as a global language of communication, education, technology, and employment. In a multilingual country like India, English functions both as a second language and a link language. It has been a significant part of the education system since the British colonial period. Various national educational commissions and committees have also emphasized the importance of effective English teaching in India over the years. However, inconsistencies in English language proficiency continue to exist among students at different age groups and academic levels. Drawing upon existing literature and secondary data, the paper examines the concept and the scenario of teaching of English as a second language in India. It also focuses on the major challenges faced in Indian classrooms, such as mother tongue interference, lack of motivation, defective curriculum, and lack of trained teachers. Furthermore, it suggests important pedagogical implications, such as teacher training programmes, learner-centred approaches, and proper infrastructure to address these challenges and make English language learning more practical, inclusive, and meaningful in the Indian context.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary globalised world, effective communication across nations has become highly essential. The expansion of trade, technology, commerce, and international collaboration has created a growing demand for a common linguistic medium. In this context, English has emerged as a widely



accepted global language, facilitating interaction, knowledge exchange, and professional communication across regions (Rao, 2019). As per the report of the British Council (2013), English is spoken by almost 1.75 billion people worldwide, meaning that one in every four individuals possesses some knowledge of the language. Furthermore, India is presently regarded as the second-largest English-speaking nation in the world, with approximately 125 million English speakers (Masani, 2012) indicating the growing influence of English in India.

In a multilingual country like India, English holds a distinctive position. It primarily functions as a second language and a link language that unites people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Here it also plays a significant role in administration, judiciary, media, education, business, and technology (Rathinasamy, 2018). It can be said that “English is in India today a symbol of people’s aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life...” (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2006, p. 1). Therefore, it has now become necessary for every individual to learn English in contemporary India.

However, despite the growing importance of English, the effective teaching of it as a second language in Indian classrooms remains a major challenge. As a result, many students suffer from poor learning outcomes. This present study aims to analyse the concept of teaching English as a second language in India. It also provides an overview of the existing scenario of English teaching-learning process, highlighting the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities in India. Furthermore, it discusses and analyses the challenges faced in Indian classrooms and tries to provide implications to overcome these obstacles.

2. The Concept and the Present Scenario of Teaching English as a Second Language in India

2.1. The Status of English in India and Its Multilingual Context

The language that a baby hears from birth is referred to as the mother tongue or the first language. The second language is any other language that is learnt later (Hoque, 2017). A second language generally refers to a language that gains official recognition within a country and is widely used in important areas such as administration, law, education, and media. In India, like many other countries, English is granted the status of a second language, as it holds an official or special status (Crystal, 2003). The status of English in India can also be understood from Kachru’s Three Circle Model of English. According to this model, India remains in the outer circle in terms of English language usage, while countries with native English speakers belong to the inner circle (Wohra & Roy, 2024). India is a linguistically diverse country



with five major language families, namely, Indo-European, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese, Semito-Hamitic, and many ethnic groups (Azu, 2013). Azu (2013) further notes that according to the 2001 Census data of India, there are 22 scheduled languages, 100 non-scheduled languages, and 234 mother tongues in India. English here also holds the status of a link language and lingua franca, apart from being a second language. The status of English and its importance as a second language can further be demonstrated by stating: “English will continue to enjoy a high status so long as it remains the principal medium of education at the university stage and the language of administration at the central government and in many of the states. Even after the regional languages become media of higher education in the universities, a working knowledge of English will be a valuable asset for all students, and a reasonable proficiency in the language will be necessary for those who proceed to the university.” (MOE, 1996, as cited in Meganathan, 2015, p. 137). Therefore, it can be stated that the status of English in India works as a driving force behind the success of the Indian education system.

2.2. Historical Development of English Education in India

To understand the position of English as a second language in the Indian education system, it is important to discuss the journey of the language in India since the colonial period. English first entered India as a foreign language and gradually evolved into a second language. The journey of this language from a foreign language to a second language in India generally followed the process of acculturation, pidginization, and nativization (Bhave, 2022). The institutional growth of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India began during the colonial period when Thomas Babington Macaulay, through his Minute of 1835, recommended the promotion of English education among Indians (George, 2016). English education was mainly promoted to familiarise Indians with western philosophy and modern ideas. The British government recognised English officially for administrative purposes in 1844. Later, the preferences for English-speaking Indians in government jobs under British rule further increased the demand for English education in India (Bhave, 2022). Christian missionaries also played a pivotal role in this linguistic shift by opening academic institutions. In those institutions English became the primary instructional language (Ranjan & Singh, 2025). In this way, the absorption of English culture and language into the Indian society, known as acculturation process, is largely credited with establishing English as an integral part of the Indian education system. Later, continuous interaction between Indians and the British East India Company further led to the emergence of pidgin forms of English (Bhave, 2022). This process, known as pidginization and code-mixing, gradually resulted in the development of English as a second language in India.



After Independence, the status and role of English entered a new phase and became a much-debated topic within the Indian Constituent Assembly. Hindi was initially proposed as the national language of India. But later, due to regional sentiments, Article 343 declared Hindi as the official language of the Union. But because of the constant opposition to Hindi as the sole official language, the Constitution allowed the continued use of English. After that, English was recognised as an associate official language by the Official Languages Act 1963 (Dwivedi, 2015). In this way, these historical shifts have allowed English to transcend its colonial origins. As a result, it has now turned into a vital tool for personal advancement and global networking in modern Indian society (Ranjan & Singh, 2025).

With the expansion of the role of English across different fields, several Indian commissions and committees have provided recommendations to reform the Indian education system, including English language teaching (ELT), from independence to the present day (Nishath & Hussain, 2023). The University Education Commission (1948) emphasized the importance of English in schools and universities. Later, the Kothari Commission (1964-66) recommended English as a ‘library language,’ which encouraged the use of English-medium textbooks in many subjects. As a result, English became an important medium of content learning and academic instruction in India (George, 2016). The Three–Language Formula was also proposed in 1956 and adopted in 1961 to maintain the importance of English in the Indian education system while promoting multilingual learning. Subsequently, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 shifted English language teaching towards communicative methods by promoting learner-centred pedagogical approaches based on real-life contexts (Ranjan & Singh, 2025). Most recently, the National Education Policy 2020 has encouraged multilingual education by promoting the mother tongue in the early years of schooling. Moreover, it emphasizes English as an important language by supporting bilingual textbooks and teaching-learning materials. This will help students to learn subjects such as science and mathematics in both their home language and English (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020).

2.3. Objectives of Teaching English as a Second Language in India

The growing institutional importance of English influenced the objectives of English language teaching in India. Primarily the objectives of English language teaching in India should be designed to meet the needs of a diverse multilingual society. Learners come from different cultural, linguistic, social, and economic backgrounds with varying levels of proficiency. In this context, learning English as a second language should enable learners to understand different cultures (Rathinasamy, 2018). Most importantly, the purpose of learning English should extend beyond studying textbooks. English teaching must focus



on developing students' practical and functional command of the language. It should emphasize the development of learners' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Chandraiah, 2025). Furthermore, Students must possess the capability to use English grammar, meaning, and discourse appropriately in different social and communicative contexts (Sindkhedkar, 2012). English language teaching in India should also focus on meaningful communication, comprehensible input, multilingual learning, and avoidance of rote memorisation. The focus of Second language pedagogy should be the natural acquisition of the target language by the learners through everyday conversations, apart from passing examinations (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2006). These mentioned above objectives will help learners in developing effective communicative competence in English.

2.4. Methods of Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in India

Various methods and approaches are used in teaching English as a second language to fulfil the objectives and attain proficiency in English in India. Some of the most popular methods are the traditional Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Bilingual Method, and the Structural Method. Educators also utilise other modern English language teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response (TPR), and Suggestopedia (Bhamare, 2017). It has been noticed that in bidialectal classrooms, teachers need to understand both the target language and the child's mother tongue while showing equal respect to both languages. They often prefer the code-switching method in teaching the target language as this method helps learners recognise the systematic differences between dialects and creates awareness to support effective language learning (as cited in Kumar & Narendra, 2012). Furthermore, the traditional Grammar Translation Method continues to remain relevant as it provides a practical framework for supporting large, diverse groups of students with varying academic levels (Rajeev T, 2020).

2.5. The Present Scenario of Teaching English as a Second Language in India

Despite the significant role of English in Indian education, the effective teaching of English as a second language continues to face several challenges. It has been noticed that many students are unable to comprehend English texts effectively, as their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are not sufficiently developed. Recent reports highlight the deterioration of students' English writing skill. Nowadays students struggle to write full correct sentences in English because they have become habituated to use the abbreviated terms (Mazumdar, 2025). Moreover, many students across different age groups and academic levels are unable to read simple English sentences. Since the last assessment in



2016, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2022) data further show that children's reading ability has remained almost unchanged. 24.7% of class V students were able to read simple sentences in English while in 2022, the figure slightly declined to 24.5%. Such deficiencies in English proficiency extend beyond school education and are also evident at the higher education level. The survey of the Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023 Beyond Basics (ASER Centre, 2024) report suggests, 57.3 % of the participants possess the ability to read English sentences. Vadivel and P'Rayan (2017) also observed that students frequently adopted passive role in the English classroom. The researchers attributed this behaviour to a combination of factors including fear of making mistakes, a lack of confidence in grammatical ability, and a lack of opportunities to practice speaking. Furthermore, the authors noted that as students struggle to form coherent sentences, they often experience a gradual loss of interest in the language. A study by Hellystia (2019) found that learners often transferred mother tongue patterns into English writing. An analysis of the writing skill of 130 Engineering students in Bhubaneswar revealed that misordering errors was the most frequent error (48%), followed by misinformation (24%), addition (20%), and omission errors (8.2%). This occurred due to strong mother tongue interference in sentence structure. A recent report highlights that government schools in Karnataka are losing enrolment due to an increasing preference for English medium education, reflecting gaps in English language teaching quality and classroom practices (Ullas, 2025). Therefore, it becomes important to examine the major challenges associated with ESL teaching in the Indian context.

3. Challenges of Teaching English as a Second Language in Indian Classrooms

Teaching English as a second language in an Indian classroom is a complex process influenced by various social, linguistic, psychological, and educational factors. But the teaching - learning process of English in India faces numerous challenges affecting learners' language proficiency. These challenges are discussed below in light of different Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and classroom practices.

i. Dominance of the Mother Tongue and Bilingual Teaching

The dominance of the mother tongue and bilingual teaching act as major obstacles to learning English as a second language in India. This major obstacle can be analysed in light of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition. According to this view language is acquired through meaningful communication whereas language learning involves conscious study of grammar rules. Therefore, the conscious effort of learning grammar rules does not efficiently bridge the gap to natural, effortless speech (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). But in India, English as a second language is mainly taught using the bilingual method



and using the mother tongue, which impacts the spontaneous language use (Devis, 2020). Furthermore, the SLA theory based on Behaviourism emphasizes the importance of the first language (L1) in the second language (L2) as interference. Similarities between L1 and L2 lead to positive transfer while differences cause negative transfer resulting in errors (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). But in India the use of the mother tongue affects ESL learners' pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Velagaleti, 2024), leading to difficulties in accurate and fluent English communication.

ii. Poor Development of Speaking and Listening Skills

Poor development of speaking and listening skills is a significant challenge in Indian ESL classrooms. This can be explained through theory of Behaviourism and Cummins's Contextual Interaction Theory. According to Behaviourism language learning develops through imitation, repetition, practice, and reinforcement (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). Furthermore, Cummins's Contextual Interaction Theory highlights factors such as effective and meaningful input and a supportive low anxiety environment for the development of second language acquisition. Moreover, it also emphasizes how regular interaction with teachers and peers directly improves students' participation in learning (Lavadenz, 2011). But in reality, Indian classrooms rely heavily in teacher-led instruction. Therefore, students receive very few opportunities to engage themselves in interactive activities like role playing or group work. Consequently, students struggle with fluency and independent communication. Furthermore, as the listening skill is often expected to develop without formal instruction, it is largely neglected by educators (Singh & Halim, 2023). Therefore, lack of initiative prevents learners from understanding correct use of vocabulary, sentence structure, and tenses in spoken communication (Betal & Banerjee, 2023).

iii. Lack of Motivation

Lack of interest among students, especially in rural areas is a major barrier to effective English learning in India. This challenge can be understood in the light of Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. It points out that learners acquire language more effectively when they feel motivated, confident, and comfortable in the learning environment. However, stress, fear, low motivation, and pressure can prevent learners from properly understanding and acquiring language input (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). But in India the social environment and students' home environment do not sufficiently motivate them to learn English. As a result, their lack of participation creates obstacle in their English language acquisition (Mishra, 2025).



iv. Lack of Parental Involvement and Support

Lack of parental involvement is another significant challenge in learning English as a second language in India. It can be understood in relation to the concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the More knowledgeable Other from Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has been defined by Vygotsky (1978) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (as cited in Shabani et al., 2010, p. 238). A child's intellectual growth is heavily dependent on socialization. Mentorship from guardians, educators and more mature youth helps them adopt culturally relevant skills (Gauvain, 2008). However, in many Indian households, students do not get opportunities to practise English as they communicate in their mother tongue with their family members; moreover, lack of educational support and guidance from family members further affects students' second language skill development (Nandi, 2021).

v. Large Classroom

Highly populated classrooms often act as a barrier in English teaching in India. This challenge can also be interpreted through lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. This theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction, support and guidance from a more knowledgeable other as mentioned earlier. But high classroom density in India limits a teacher's ability to focus on individual student needs. Furthermore, these overcrowded classrooms often lead to behavioural disruptions. Eventually it hinders the regular communication and interactive feedback process required for effective second language acquisition (Seenivasan & Gadani, 2025).

Apart from these above mentioned pedagogical and learner-centred challenges, several institutional and systematic factors also posit obstacles in English teaching-learning process in Indian classrooms. These are as follows:

vi. Defective Curriculum and Rural-Urban Division

The systemic gaps in English curriculum in India challenge the teaching-learning process. Students attending English medium schools typically develop superior linguistics skills because they benefit from language exposure since their early childhood. But their peers in rural or non-English medium environments lag behind as they are introduced to the language much later (Syal, 2019). Besides, the introduction of English varies in different Indian states that leads to discrepancies in learners' exposure to



English language. In some states, like Karnataka, English is introduced earlier, while in states like West Bengal and Odisha, English is introduced later. These curricular variations create unequal opportunities that ultimately contribute to differences in English proficiency between rural and urban students (Sovani, 2023).

vii. Time Constraint

In India, a major problem with teaching English is the lack of classroom time, as most class periods last only 45 minutes. While focusing on completing the prescribed exam syllabus, teachers neglect question-answer sessions, helpful interactions, and individual feedback during teaching. As a result, students fail to acquire English language skills effectively (Nandi, 2021).

viii. Lack of Training

Poor teacher training programmes in India prevent teachers from acquiring adequate skills and effective strategies for teaching English. Consequently, many teachers appear to lose confidence that proves challenging in the delivery of quality English language instruction (Singh & Halim, 2023).

4. Implications

The challenges faced in the English teaching-learning process often lead to poor learning outcomes for students in India. So, the following implications are suggested.

i. Motivation and Positive Attitude Towards Second Language Learning

Learning a second language requires strong motivation. Teachers must help students see the real-world value of English in school and work. Furthermore, clear personal goals and positive mindset make students more confident and active in class. Ultimately students need steady encouragement and guidance from their teachers for language learning development (Raju & Joshith, 2017).

ii. Adoption of Modern Pedagogical Methods

Teachers should refrain from using only the traditional Grammar Translation Method. Instead, they must adopt modern pedagogical methods to develop students' speaking and writing skills in English (Chandraiah, 2025).



iii. Teacher Training and Professional Development Programmes

Effective teacher training programmes and continuous professional courses can be helpful in overcoming many challenges of English language teaching in India. Teachers should be imparted training in modern technology, different modern teaching methods such as communicative language teaching, differentiated instruction, task-based learning, and language proficiency programmes to create interactive and student-friendly classrooms (Manju, 2024).

iv. Use of Learning Resources and Technology

Proper educational facilities such as libraries, multimedia labs, language learning materials, and visual aids can improve English language teaching. The use of computer tablets and language learning applications makes classrooms more interactive and engaging. Better internet connectivity, online learning platforms and distance learning can also help students access quality English education in remote areas. Furthermore, digital literacy training for both teachers and students is important for effective use of technology in language learning (Manju, 2024).

v. Inclusive Classroom Practices

Teachers should create inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms by promoting cultural awareness, mutual respect, and sensitivity among students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, different teaching strategies and learning materials should be incorporated, addressing different learning styles. As a result, all learners will be motivated to participate effectively in the language learning process (Singh, 2024).

5. Conclusion

English plays a major role in India as a second language and a link language. It has now emerged as the language of communication, higher studies, business, foreign affairs, employment, and global participation, necessitating the teaching and learning of English. But teaching English as a second language in India faces several challenges. Issues like the impact of regional languages on English, the lack of focus on all four aspects of a language, lack of motivation, untrained teachers, and parental indifference pose obstacles in the way of smooth teaching and learning practices, causing lack of proficiency in the English language. However, to overcome these challenges equal importance should be given to all four language skills. Modern teaching methods such as- the Communicative Language Teaching method, use of ICT, and Continuous Professional Development of teachers are also necessary to improve English language teaching in India. Only by addressing these core issues, teaching English as



a second language in India can become more inclusive, practical, and beneficial for learners from diverse linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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