

# Research Journal Of English(RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Impact Factor:8.16 (SJIF)

ISSN:2456-2696

Indexed in: Cosmos, Google & International Scientific Indexing (ISI) etc

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## Developing English Oral Communication in Telugu-Medium Schools: An Integrated Pedagogical Approach

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Paper Received on 27-04-2024, Accepted on 28-05-2024

Published on 30-05-24; DOI:10.36993/ RJOE.2024.9.2.434

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### Abstract

The integration of listening and speaking skills into English-language classrooms in linguistically diverse contexts in the Indian subcontinent, is a dimension which so far has been under-researched and controversial in L2 pedagogy. Although communicative competence is emphasized in the national policies for education, there is a considerable gap when it comes to teaching of English in Telugu medium schools. This article discusses the and practical constraints and the methodological possibilities of implementing an integrated approach to oral language skills in Telugu medium classrooms where English is taught. Based on the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), sociocultural theory and recent development in empirical studies in the South Indian educational context, the present paper proposes to suggest the possibility of using a blended approach with English speaking skills, as a tool to aid students in Telugu classrooms. This method, however, can impede the students' learning if it fails to account for the language structure of the language, students' social and cultural background, and students' language learning ability. The article advocates a revised, contextually embedded, integrated model that is sensitive to the students' native language resources but embraces it instead.

**Keywords:** Telugu medium classroom, educational context, sociocultural limitations, structural approach, pedagogy. Linguistic limitation etc.

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## Introduction

It is neither insignificant nor a settled aspect to determine the best ways to teach English in Telugu-medium schools in Telangana. It is a space of interaction between politics of language, social aspiration, pedagogical theory, and real-life experiences in the classroom. For millions of native-speaking students, English is a course of learning and a sign of moving to a higher social class and there is an urgent need, and sometimes a controversy, to teach English effectively (Canagarajah, 2013). However, although decades have passed and changes in curriculum have been made, English education in Telugu medium schools remains strongly centred on reading and writing whereas listening speaking are considered as secondary activities to be dealt with once students have mastered reading and writing. It is of course, a well-established method but is not pedagogically justifiable given the position SLA research takes on the importance of oral interaction in L2 development.

This pedagogical shift to multi-language and competency-based curriculum for language under the NEP 2020 has provided a fresh and added vigour to the discussion by prioritizing communication skills of language over objective and abstract grammar (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the policy focus on mother tongue teaching in the early years, and its focus on communicating in some sort of purposeful way, leaves room to consider how listening and speaking can be meaningfully incorporated into a curriculum that has historically been predominantly text-focused. Any such integrated approach that may be considered for implementation in Telugu-medium schools would need to tackle issues that may not be explored in depth in any educational policy or planning documents, including untrained teachers, an overcrowded classroom, poor audiovisual facilities, and the complex sociolinguistic environment in which bilingual children, who use Telugu, English, and other regional languages, or even Urdu, navigate their lives in various domains.

Creating an integrated listening-speaking curriculum is both theoretically necessary and is a pedagogical possibility in the domestic contexts of native speakers of the Telugu language, so long as the school accommodates and respects translanguaging activities that students already demonstrate in their everyday lives with a degree of seriousness. The article also addresses and considers counterarguments from scholars who argue that models of oral integration sustainable in Native communities are not culturally suitable in educational contexts for South Asia, or that they may be a form of "methodological imperialism", with a dominant communication norm that

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underprivileges the ways of communication of their communities (Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994). While it was not a give in on inaction, it was a demand that one considers these critiques to be an invitation to engage in more sophisticated, locally-informed pedagogical design.

## **Theoretical Foundations: Why Listening and Speaking Must Be Integrated**

There is a foundation of theory and research in favour of incorporating listening and speaking skills. The Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1982), although quite controversial over the past several decades, has left a lasting mark that the language is acquired when the learner is presented with comprehensible input that is slightly beyond his or her current level of language acquisition. For the Telugu users of English, it implies that listening to English whether from a teacher, a fellow student, a recording or a multimedia platform is a key process in language acquisition. Students are not exposed to the advantages of the cascading cycles of listening and speaking feedback, as they are just doing translation work, a feature typical of a grammar-translation classroom.

This is complemented by and, in certain ways, a more powerful theory, the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept implies that learners can achieve more results when they are provided with assistance in learning and activity than when they are learning by themselves; language is learned from social interaction. This theoretical commitment translates into practical ones for situations in which the English language is used in a Telugu medium of instruction classroom, for instance, speaking activities cannot be restricted to those students who have already acquired in English the equivalent of Telugu levels of accuracy; they must be areas for students to develop themselves and to construct meaning with their peers and their instructors. In research study (Swain 1985, 1995) has indicated that productive output (speaking and writing) is not in itself a process of acquisition; it is in fact among the mechanisms used for acquisition. In her Output Hypothesis, she maintains that when learners are challenged by having to produce language, their awareness of space in their competence gaps is raised, which can only be filled when language is presented to them, and thus speaking activities are fundamentally part of learning and can't be neglected.

It was relatively recent research in the field, however, that began to examine, increasingly, the development of a set of competencies called interactional competence, a skill that goes beyond knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, to understand communicative real-time interaction (Young, 2011). For those who learn

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Telugu through reading alone, they might have a very high reading fluency in English without even being able to sustain a low-level conversation. This difference isn't about cognition, it is about lack of opportunity to create the turns, the strategies for managing turning in the classroom, the awareness that's required for discourse in speaking, or the speed of processing that is required in the moment for discourse in speaking. Given the limited time constraints and specific linguistic goals in Telugu-medium classes, Ellis (2003) has suggested that a focus on form, that is, a focus on linguistic features while working with the meaning of the message, in communicative tasks is the kind of approach that may be suitable in such settings.

Drawing a significant contrast between what Holliday (1994) labelled BANA (British, Australasian, North American) and TESEP (Tertiary, Secondary, and Primary) teaching cultures, he contended that the communicative methods devised in ABAN countries were based on small class sizes, rich resources for teaching and learning, and the presence of students in the front of the room in rows. Kanagarajah (1993) also recorded developmental strategies that are employed by Sri Lankan learners to deal with the imported pedagogical approaches in very strategic ways in which they come up with "safe houses" of local practices along with the officially sanctioned curriculum. While these critiques should not rule out the merits of oral integration, they are equally insistent that its application must be sensitive to context, rather than applying a template universal to all contexts.

**The Current State of Oral Skills Teaching in Telugu-Medium Schools**

It would be unwise to attribute to the state of English classrooms using the Telugu language without discussing their mismatch with the curriculum. It would be an honest assessment to accept that there is a significant mismatch between the actual situation and the curriculum in Telugu-medium English classrooms. The instructional methods used in teaching English that have emerged in studies conducted in Telangana have been found consistently to be grammar explanation, memorization of words, as well as comprehension of the text that is printed in the prescribed reader (Mohanraj, 2014; Annamalai, 2004). The common type of task related to speaking when it does appear in materials is reading out of the textbook, which merges decoding, reading and speaking and does not provide learners with much opportunity to speak or communicate in the target language. Listening teaching activities are even more confined in a scenario where the schools may not have any functional audio equipment (which is a substantial proportion of Telugu-medium government schools) and the listening instruction cannot be understood in any meaningful way.

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There are a number of complex factors in the cause of this situation. The competence of teachers in English is a big variable. Ramesh and Palanisamy (2012) revealed that many educators teaching English in government schools in South Indian schools are also products of grammar-translation tradition and doubt their prowess in speaking English and hesitate to perform oral activities which put their own language competence under test. This is not a remark on individual teachers, but rather a simple critique of the teacher education system that has incorporated a greater focus on grammar knowledge and pedagogic theory over communication instruction. Teachers' professional development will not be enough to provide rich listening and speaking activities in their classrooms if they are not confident oral users of English.

Added to this are the restrictions of the infrastructure. Authentic listening activities will depend on one's ability to have working audio equipment in addition to the ability to access materials such as recordings of natural spoken English, podcasts or dialogues that portray a real conversational pattern. Though digital technology has contributed in enhancing the availability of such materials to a large extent in cities, gaps in the access to digital resources still exist in the rural Telugu-medium schools (Bose, 2019). Administered by the state boards, uniform textbooks often limit the autonomy of the teacher, and his/her ability to add to and link in with those texts, even when he/she has the professional interest and technical expertise to do so. The state syllabuses in TS have greatly introduced listening and speaking component in the curriculum over the years, but they continue to be treated as after-thought, and is one of the first areas to suffer when exam pressure goes on the rise in senior classes.

This examination system is perhaps the biggest inhibiting structural barrier to oral integration. So long as the students of English language medium schools have to take exams predominantly in the reading and writing mode, with questions mainly on grammar components and writing of essays and reading and understanding passages, teachers and students will logically spend most of their teaching and learning time on these skills. The inclusion of listening and speaking activities is accompanied by an opportunity cost, which many teachers are unable to afford. It's not a pedagogical point of order, but a sensible reaction to incentive systems and a reason to reform the examination system as an inevitability of fostering a reformed curriculum. Wherever oral examinations have been tried, either as part of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) scheme in the earlier reform cycles or as independent of the examination system, this component of the reform of the curriculum has been positive but not uniform (Sharma, 2016).

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These are presented in a further layer of complexity, the sociolinguistic context. Students whose parents speak the Telugu language are not merely receivers of English language lessons; rather they are active agents who learn it in an intricate language brooding context. Most engage in what García and Wei (2014) theorize as translanguaging, the on-going movement and dynamic use of the languages they have at their disposal, Telugu, English, and sometimes other languages for purposes of meaning making. This translanguaging practice is not a failure of language separation or of language attainment but a competent communicative practice related to the multilingual life. An integrated listening-speaking approach that ultimately attempts to eradicate the native language (Telugu), requiring the use of 'English only' in classrooms, discouraging code switching, rejecting and viewing translanguaging as a competence deficit and sign of incompetence, is likely to prove pedagogically counterproductive as well as alienating in ways that will affect student engagement and confidence in it. The pedagogical hurdle, then, is not necessarily to get rid of the significance of the child's home language in the English classroom but to create positive relationships between the child's home language and the evolving competence in English so as to make use of the first one to scaffold the second rather than make them appear like two competing systems.

## **Toward an Integrated Approach: Strategies and Their Tensions**

The integrated listening-speaking strategy presents two unique challenges in the ESL classroom: firstly, the types of activities must be reconsidered; and secondly, the very structure of the lesson must be reconsidered. Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1996) argues that conversational interaction moments when communication fails and the interlocutors attempt to fill the gap in order repair the interaction are most conducive to acquisition, since such moments require careful attention to the linguistic form of the interaction in the context of the communicative need. Task-based language teaching (TBLT), which structures language instruction around actual tasks that involve learners in using language to produce real results, is the richest pedagogical elaboration of such theoretical concepts. For instance, TBLT could be used in a classroom where the students learn about the weather report in the audio part and using this information, make a spoken recommendation, or one of the two partners could have a text, instruction, or video that tells them half of the text, and the students would have to use spoken texts and interaction to get the missing half.

The challenge is here and it is one that is really going to test teachers' proficiency, material design and class management, one that Telugu-medium schools

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may not be ready to meet because TBLT places a number of demands on teachers that most schools cannot currently meet. More serious critics of TBLT's focus on the task have been Sheen (2006) and Swan (2005) who has maintained that the task-based approach tends to overlook explicit grammar instruction and can cause errors to lodge and crystallise in the learner's system resulting in learners who can communicate 'more or less' but without accuracy to become 'professionally unintelligible'. In a culture where students have English as their second language, there is added weight to these criticisms in so far as students' English is inevitably evaluated against standards of correctness which are nativist, and which can have social, political and economic, implications. A student can be flawless in performing TBLT activities but fail to meet the criterion of being fluent and using the language correctly at all the times that a criterion-referent marking system or a future employer would be assessing him/her. That this is not against oral integration but an argument for careful attention to integration and accuracy in any approach to integration.

For many Telugu-medium schools perhaps a more realistic approach is a principled eclectic methodology, which is typified by Ur (2012), which recognizes the value of methodological traditions, but does not rigidly adhere to a single methodology. That may in practice involve using leads (structured listening activities) based on the textbook material first, followed by a gradually rising tier of listening comprehension with either graded texts (textbooks) or texts read to students by a teacher or a puppet character whose level of input is just short of their current ability. Such moments should be followed by guided speaking exercises (repetition, substitution and guided dialogues) which help to develop automaticity and confidence for students before they can enter into free and spontaneous oral communication. However, as skill and confidence build up, these can be made increasingly less controlled such as role plays, discussions, storytelling, oral summary from listened text. This "release of responsibility" follows the approach of Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) instructional model, which overlaps the scaffolding tenets of the sociocultural theory, but mitigates the accuracy concerns that some critics of TBLT have raised.

The integration of listening and speaking in Telugu as scaffolding language and not excluded language is specially emphasized. The interdependence hypothesis by Cummins (2001) states that academic competence in L1 and conceptual knowledge of L1 is transferable to L2 learning and hence, the inclusion of L2 (Telugu) in the L1 classroom is not detrimental, but may be facilitating in certain

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contexts for concept clarity, for discussion of task demands, and for metalinguistic reflection on differences between L1 and L2. In an eclectic sampling of studies of the effectiveness of first language (L1) use by both L1 teacher and L1 learner, classroom research by Macaro (2009) has shown that strategic L1 use does not hinder L2 acquisition but can, in certain cases, improve it by freeing up cognitive space in learners' minds for more advanced L2 processing and engagement with target language content. Allowing students from the Telugu-side to talk about what they heard in Telugu and respond to it in English, or to think through what they are going to speak in English and then express it in the native language, could be the key to having a significant dialogue or superficial performance that conceals comprehension deficits.

The importance of the digital technology to support an integrated approach can be great but with an open-mind on equity. In competency-based countries like Kenya where there is no literacy of English in most low-income communities, mobile phones are available and can provide access to listening materials: podcasts in English from the Water and Sanitation ministry, YouTube videos from educational content providers, and a voice message service on the messaging app WhatsApp, which can work with both the community and the educators. Canagarajah (2013) has suggested that digital tools can encourage learners to engage in what he terms "translingual practice," which involves a very different kind of exposure to English, enabling learners to experience a much wider range of English as it is actually used throughout the world, instead of having it limited to the standardised variant available in textbooks.

Recording techniques enable students to show critical reflection upon their own output, to build metalinguistic sensitivity towards pronunciation, intonation and discourse structure. It is intellectually not correct, however, to represent the integration of technology in the oral teaching learning process to be universally obtained by all the Telugu medium students. The adoption of digital solutions must be paired with real-world resources, not as a roadblock to addressing systemic underfunding of under-resourced schools.

## **Teacher Development Programmes**

A successful integrated approach depends on the successful teacher development. Shulman's (1987) based idea of pedagogical content knowledge, or the combination of what a teacher knows about the content of the language being taught, and what he or she knows about how to teach it, reminds us that a competent language

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teacher should be an effective user of the language, and should also know the unique characteristics of the language content his or her students are learning, as well as the unique type of instruction that is required. Professional development, for teachers' speaking Telugu language, is about enhancing their proficiency in English and improving their own repertoire of strategies to make sure their own students are good listeners and speakers in their native language (Telugu) in large, under-resourced classrooms in which all students are not equally proficient in English. There should be continuous professional development programmes based on the actual scenario of the Telugu medium schools and not on the theories taken from the English medium schools of education. Oral components of pre-service teacher education programmes in Telangana should also pay increased attention to oral practice (exercise of students' oral skills) and provide the students ability to teach oral skills.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Developing Listening and Speaking skills are not 'extra' in the teaching and learning process of English Language teaching in the medium of instruction 'English Language' but is part of the whole as an 'essential' to the teaching and learning process in compliance with the decades of SLA research. Those students who depart without being able to communicate orally in English are not only forfeiting a language proficiency, they are forfeiting a world of potential wages and opportunity to participate equally in the world of employment and society where oral exchange in English is an inherent constraint. There is nothing good about taking the "oral integration thing" seriously, then.

The question of how to integrate these new tools (which were built for others by outsiders), how quickly to do so, and how much to adapt them to the needs of the Telugu-medium learners, while they do not strip or diminish them of their core essence and values, remain inconclusive. If Holliday (1994) and Pennycook (1994) express correctly that we should not mechanically adopt Western methodologies, then they should provide us with a meal of ideas and not methodological indigestion in the face of the challenge to adapt to local contexts. It is not your responsibilities to offer students a choice between "western integrated" learning and a local tidier grammar translation school, but it is a responsibility to choose a good classroom practice than a falsely-improved grammar translation.

It is the kind of approach, which the English as medium of instruction for the subjects covered in the English-medium school that require in the English-medium curriculum in a way that provided in the Telugu medium, but in a translingual

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treatment of listening and speaking, in a controlled to open-ended progression, in terms of students' mother tongue resources, in respect to the material and professional conditions of teaching, and that an examination system must change, if the practice of the classroom is to change in any sustainable manner. The vision in NEP 2020 of competency based, multi-lingual education is a blue print for developing such an approach, however, policy vision and classroom reality will merge only as long as teachers receive professional support as well as conducive policies in a framework where they are permitted to teach differently.

The approach given in this article is not a rule for all time, but a call to action; a call that acknowledges and engages with the research findings about language learning, and the experience of practice that tells us what needs to change in the working lives of Telugu-medium teachers and learners in order to reform them, and a call that draws upon the wisdom of ethics in language education to remind us that the goal of language education is to shape the future of languages in ways that leave all learners as learners, regardless of the language in which they were educated.

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