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Some Suggestions to Improve English Textbooks Published by the Tamilnadu Government

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.



Deficiencies Noticed in the English Textbooks Published by the Government of Tamilnadu

The Tamilnadu Government has been publishing textbooks for use in the schools for a long time. So, naturally, one would expect that over the years the design of the textbooks, contents, organization and presentation of contents, gradation of materials as well as the language used, relevance of the choice of topics, etc., would have greatly improved. Why is it that this did not/does not happen? Why is it that English language textbooks continue to have many awkward sentences, wrong choice of words, grammar errors, irrelevant choice of materials, defective gradation, etc.?

Textbook Preparation – Art and Science: Immense Variety and Abundant Models of English Textbooks Around the World

Textbook preparation is both an art and science. It demands extraordinary, natural and intuitive understanding of what a textbook is, and how it can and should be developed in conjunction with the curriculum. It requires specialization and constant and continued touch with the developments around the world.

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Of all the languages in the world, English has the largest number of and diverse textbooks to meet the needs of learners. Thus, abundant examples and models are easily available for any English language textbook writer or team. With diligence, practical intelligence and imagination, textbook designers can work out their outline to meet the needs of their audience. Theoretical knowledge adopted from courses in language teaching, etc. is not adequate. Real practical experience would be an advantage. Where there is no such experience, the individual or the team should have the capacity to observe what is around, choose the best and do the transfer from the finest and most effective model/s to meet their current needs. Humility and willingness to learn should guide those who are involved in organizing groups to prepare, test and evaluate textbooks apart from their knowledge of the language and the contents, etc.

Indian Model: Choice of Indian Teachers to Teach English

Almost from the beginning, English language teaching in India deliberately adopted the plan of Indian nationals teaching English in schools and other educational institutions to fellow Indians. This, indeed, was a very wise step, since spread of the knowledge and use of English could not have been achieved if we were dependent only upon imported teachers from Britain. However, this adoption of Indian nationals as teachers of English should not result in any kind of license to deviate too much, or radically differ from the fundamentals of native English speaking styles and uses, etc. Yet, it appears that with less qualified teachers, who are not able to speak English with confidence and skill in a manner that non-Indians would be able to understand what Indian nationals say in English, there has been progressive loss of competence in the use of English.

The problem was driven by energetic efforts to nationalize textbook production and distribution through government-owned corporations. Preparation of textbooks became the prerogative of the education department officials. Textbooks were/are made available at a very reasonable price to students. While this is a tremendous and much needed achievement, quality improvement of the presentation of contents and the methods of selection, gradation and presentation somehow has not been adequately taken care of.

Two Issues Under Discussion in This Paper

I would like to consider several issues in a few articles. In this article, my focus is on two specific issues:

Language as Content

1. We should consider the distinction that we need to maintain between the choice of teachers to prepare English language textbooks and the choice of teachers for the preparation of non-language content-oriented/subject textbooks such as science textbooks, social studies textbooks, etc.

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While the subject textbook writers may have some problems with the use of English or any other language that is used as the medium of instruction, their control over the knowledge of contents of their subject should be superb and their skill in handling the methods of teaching and evaluation of student performance in teaching these subjects should have been well demonstrated.

For English language textbook writers, English is not a stepping stone to teach contents. Language in itself is the content of their textbooks and the major focus of their teaching, etc. If they do not have demonstrated competence through their publications, methods of teaching and evaluating student performance, they should not be part of the group that is invited to prepare English language textbooks. If they are really skilled in English, the textbook which they have helped to produce will easily reveal their competence in English. The defects we notice in English Language Textbooks published by the Government of Tamilnadu perhaps reveal the other part of the story of cronyism, nepotism, considerations based on equitable distribution of membership based on gender, region, religion, caste, etc. I am all for equitable distribution but not at the cost of much needed competence in the English language. This yardstick should apply also to all the supervisors of committees.

Not merely spoken language competence, but high level of competence in writing English must be required for both the textbook writers and their supervisors. Perhaps a written test followed by interview to test their spoken language competence for all teachers of the state should be conducted. It should be open to all irrespective of their gender, caste, region, religion, etc. backgrounds. The successful candidates may be invited to teach model classes as well to finally settle upon the best talents to be part of the textbook writing team. Perhaps this suggestion is too romantic, but what is required is that those who are selected to be part of the textbook writing group should have excellent command over the language as well as the methods of textbook preparation, teaching and evaluation.

Continuity of Membership in the Textbook Preparation Teams

2. There should be continuity between books prepared for various standards. There should also be continuity of membership in the groups that are nominated to write textbooks. Thirdly, there should also be continuity among the groups of consultants selected for committees that deal with various standards. I will take up the issue of continuity of language elements (and their integration with what needs to be focused upon in a specific textbook) between books prepared for various standards in another article. Let us focus here on the other two aspects.

The Tamilnadu English textbooks preparation is guided by a committee, which lacks continuity of membership across standards (grades/classes). Let me present the data for two classes (Standard 1 to Standard 2) to prove this point:

Standard 1

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Textbook Team: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. (Presumably some of them are Teachers and others holding some official position, etc.)

Expert Team: I, J, K. (Consultants, not clear whether they were teachers sometime in their career.)

Review Committee: L and M. (Former officials of the Department of Education)

Artists Team: N, O, P and Q

Standard 2

Textbook Team: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. (Presumably Teachers. Most are from high and higher secondary schools.)

Expert Team: 7, 8 and 9 (This person is shown to be the Chairperson, from a Higher Secondary School.). (Others also seem to be teachers from High/Higher Secondary Schools.)

Expert Committee: 10. (A retired principal of a teacher training institute)

Artists Team: 11, 12 and 13.

Note that there is no continuity of individuals in these committees. How do they make connections between the Standard 1 textbook and the Standard 2 textbook? All textbooks should be built step by step from the bottom so that the curriculum, syllabus, contents, language, tests, etc., are all properly integrated. Giving a general plan of textbook preparation for various standards to the committee members or even training the committee members in the art of writing textbooks will not result in a well co-ordinated series of textbooks. At least a few of the members should continue to be part of the team throughout the process covering all standards/classes. Instead of focusing upon classroom teaching experience in the selection of members for the textbook writing team, we should focus on the competence of the members in English, when it comes to writing English language textbooks. Yet, there is always a great advantage when the textbook drafts are given to practising teachers to read, critique and even demonstrate the use of these textbooks in actual classroom (model classroom) setting.

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