

A Study on Learning English by the 12th Standard Assamese Medium Students of Barpeta District, Assam, India

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that English occupies a place of prestige not only in our society, but also in every nook and corner of the globe. In our country, no indigenous language however has come up to replace English, either as a medium of communication or as official language. The knowledge of English gives us a high social status in general and enables us to establish intellectual, cultural, economic, commercial and political relation with the rest of the world. After all, its knowledge is regarded essential in almost all the branches of learning as well as for most of the people under the sky. In spite of such positive aspect and response, how many of the students have good command over English is a question of great importance. How many of the students' community can use English in their practical life situation after completion of their education? The case of Assamese medium students is still worse. Though a limited number of students get satisfactory marks in the examination, they cannot use English in their practical life. Observing these it is assumed that the standard of teaching and learning English have some hurdles which may be because of the teachers' role or the students' irresponsibility. This article makes an attempt to trace the problems faced by the students in learning English at Higher Secondary Schools of Assam with special reference to Barpeta district. It aims at presenting the contemporary situation in Assam with regard to English teaching and learning and suggesting effective methods of teaching English to those students whose background and exposure to English is very limited in the classroom as well as in the school campus and outside the school.

Keywords: English language, medium of communication, teaching English, learning English, Assamese medium students, exposure to English.

Introduction

English is treated as a lingua franca of the world because of its wider exposure in all fields like science and technology, modernity and development. English has been given a social status symbol. Most of

the parents prefer their children to be an English educated person. But the performance of English in the Govt. educational institutions is remarkably poor. It has been observed that even most of the students of Higher Secondary level fumble in speaking English. Their English competency is not up to the mark, rather worse, because they are not trained in listening and speaking skills in the English classroom. Their chief emphasis is on reading and writing as they have to pass in the examination, just by giving answers to the questions. It is seen that most of the students can neither write nor speak correct English even after completion of their Higher Secondary education, after learning English for 10 to 12 years as a core subject; it is beyond most of them. All these indicate that there must be some problems in between the teaching-learning process of English in the educational institutions of Assam.

In order to achieve the desired goal of teaching and learning English at Higher Secondary level, it is very essential to observe and find out the root of the problems, so that required measures can be adopted to make the teaching-learning process more fruitful and effective.

The Objectives of This Paper

1. The main objective of this article is to analyze the problems of learning English language by the 12th standard Assamese medium students of Barpeta district, Assam.
2. To study the present status of English language learning in Higher Secondary Schools, and Jr. Colleges of Barpeta district.
3. To study the difficulties of the teachers in general and of the students in particular.

Methodology

The research methodology gives a detail account of the research design including population of the study, definition of the sample, and administration of the questionnaire and data analysis process. The data were collected through descriptive field survey method. The data were collected from total 20 institutions of Barpeta district offering the Higher Secondary course. Total 20 teacher respondents consisting of one English teacher from each institution and two hundred (200) student respondents consisting of ten (10) students from each institution were taken as sample. In case of teacher respondents, representation was made from both genders, male and female, different age groups and different teaching experiences. In the case of student respondents both boys and girls were taken into consideration.

The data were collected on personal observation, discussion, and through recording and questionnaires. Total six sets of questionnaires were prepared for the collection of data. One set was for the teacher and the remaining five sets were for the students. Amongst the five sets of students' questionnaires, one set was prepared for the students' over all information and views on different teaching learning domain, and the remaining four sets of students questionnaires were prepared skill wise, one questionnaire for each skill (i.e., Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) for diagnostic test to find out their difficult areas of language learning. The teachers' questionnaire consisted of total 36 (thirty-six) questions of both multiple choice and open-ended type questions. The students general questionnaire consisted of 31 (thirty-one) multiple choice questions.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Students' Need of English language

statements	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Uncertain %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
To get a good job	58.5	26	2.5	10	3
To develop my personality	69.5	28	1.5	1	0
To complete my graduation	44	26	11	19	0
To pursue higher education	60.5	27	8.5	4	0
To read English news paper, novels etc.	25	22	23	26	4
To communicate with non-Assamese speakers	27.5	30	12	23	7.5
To know about English culture and society	29.5	37	15	16	2.5
To get social respect	35	38.5	6.5	17	3

The above mentioned Table shows the findings of students' attitude towards the use of the English language. Students were asked about their opinions on eight statements, which carry both instrumental and integrative motivation.

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The most important reason felt by the students for why they were learning English was to develop their personality. 69.5% of the students strongly felt that they needed English to develop their personality, whereas, 28% of the students agreed with it (2nd item). A great number of the students were of the view that they learn English to pursue higher education. 60.5% of the students strongly agreed and 27% of the students agreed with this point that they learned English to pursue higher education. Again, another higher percentage of the students expressed their opinion that they needed English ‘to get good job’. There were 58.5% students who strongly agreed and 26% students who agreed in favour of the view that they learn English to get job. Another large number of the students group felt that they were learning English ‘to complete their graduation’. 44% of the students strongly agreed and 26% of the students agreed to it. Out of the eight statements, the least favoured one among the respondents was ‘to read English newspaper, novels, books etc’. Only 25% students strongly agreed and 22% students agreed with it. The students were also not favourable for the statements such as - ‘to communicate with non-Assamese speakers’; ‘to know about English culture and society’ and ‘to get social respect’. Only 27.5% of the respondents strongly agreed and 30% of the respondents agreed that they learned English to communicate with non-Assamese speakers. 29.5% respondents strongly agreed and 37% of the respondents agreed that they learned English to know English culture and society. And 35% of the students strongly agreed and 38.5% of the students agreed with the point that they learned English to get respect in the society. It is evident from the students’ response that they learnt English for its utilitarian value.

Table 2: Students’ Perception of Importance of English Language Skills

Skills	Most imp. (%)	Important (%)	Least imp. (%)	Cannot say (%)
Listening	11	16.5	30.5	42
Speaking	54.5	28.5	15	2
Reading	8.5	23.5	42	26
Writing	26	3.5	12.5	30

The above mentioned table depicts the students’ perception of the importance of English language skills. The students were asked to rank the four language skills from 1 to 4, where 1 stood for the most important skill, 2 stood for important, 3 for least important skill and 4 stood for cannot say.

Speaking was preferred by 54.5% of the students to be the most important and 28.5% of the students to be an important skill. Reading was chosen as the least important skill by the respondents. Only 8.5% of the students felt reading to be the most important skill. Writing, though ranked far behind speaking, was considered second in importance. 26% of the respondents felt writing to be the most important skill. Only 11% respondents believed listening to be the most important skills.

The students' proficiency in English language skills is presented in the following table. These results were obtained through the use of a five point link card scale questionnaire with 5 = very good, 4= good, 3= satisfactory, 2= poor, 1=very poor. The following table will display the results of the students' proficiency in English language skills.

Table3. Students' proficiency in English language skills

Skills	Very good (%)	Good (%)	Satisfactory (%)	Poor (%)	Very poor (%)
Listening	0	18	34	30.5	17.5
Speaking	0	5.5	35	52	7.5
Reading	6	48.5	19.5	14	12
Writing	12.5	34.5	44	10.5	4.4

The above table reflects that the sample students exhibited very limited language proficiency in all language skills. May be it is perhaps the outcome of inappropriate syllabus design, lack of motivation, and lack of exposure. The least proficient skill among the students was speaking. Unfortunately, there was no one among all the two hundred respondents who could be categorized as very good in speaking English language. Only 5.5% of the students were found as good in speaking English. Even 52% and 7.5% of the students were poor and very poor respectively in speaking English. Listening is another skill where students felt much difficulty. In the case of the listening skill also, no student was rated as very good. Only 18% of the students were good and 34% of the students were found satisfactory. Some 30.5% and 17.5%

of the students were found poor and very poor in listening skill respectively. A higher percentage of the students felt reading and writing skills were better than that of listening and speaking skills. There were 6% and 48.5% of the students who were very good and good respectively in reading skill and 12.5% students were very good and 34.5% students were good in writing skill. Moreover 44% of the students were satisfied with their writing skill. The numbers of poor and very poor students were also remarkably limited in writing skill. Only 10.5% students were recorded as poor and 4.5% students were recorded as very poor in writing skill.

Table 4: English Language Need

Sl. No.	Rating	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	120	60
2	Agree	65	32.5
3	Uncertain	0	0
4	Disagree	15	7.5
5	Strongly disagree	0	0
6	total	200	100

The above mentioned table reflects the students' views regarding the question whether they think that knowledge of English is very important; almost all the students showed highly positive response. 60% of the students strongly agreed and 32.5% of the students agreed with this question. Though only a few students (7.5) disagreed, remarkably, there was no one who strongly disagreed regarding the importance of the English language.

Table 5: The Effectiveness of the English Syllabus

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	61	30.5
2	Agree	40	20
3	Uncertain	16	8
4	Disagree	83	41.5

5	Strongly disagree	0	0
6	Total	200	100

According to table no.5, responding to the question ‘do you think the present English syllabus is helping in improving your English language skills?’ the students expressed their almost mixed perception regarding their English syllabus. 30.5% of the respondents strongly agreed and 20% of the respondents agreed with it. Though there was no respondent who strongly disagreed, 41.5% of the respondents disagreed with it.

Table 6: Relevance of the English Textbook to the Students’ Need

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	18	9
2	Agree	114	57
3	Uncertain	9	4.5
4	Disagree	47	23.5
5	Strongly disagree	12	6
6	Total	200	100

Regarding the question ‘do you think the English text books you are studying are relevant to your need’, a substantial number of students were in favour of it. 9% of the students strongly agreed and 57% of the students agreed that their text books were relevant to their need. A small number of students were against it. 23.5% of the students disagreed and only 6% of the students strongly disagreed.

Table 7: Students’ Interest in the Content of English Course

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	38	19
2	Agree	91	45.5
3	Uncertain	8	4

4	Disagree	54	27
5	Strongly disagree	9	4.5
6	Total	200	100

The above mentioned table reflects that majority of the student respondents were affirmative in their answers to the question ‘do you think that content of your English course is interesting?’ There were 19% of the students who strongly agreed and 45.5% of the students who agreed that the content of their English course was interesting. 27% students disagreed and only 4.5% students strongly disagreed with it.

Table 8: Students’ English Language Proficiency

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	0	0
2	Agree	29	14.5
3	Uncertain	6	3
4	Disagree	138	69
5	Strongly disagree	27	13.5
6	Total	200	100

In response to the question ‘do you understand when your teacher explains the lesson only in English?’ the students revealed that majority of them felt it difficult to understand; and thus, obviously the result was not satisfactory. Unfortunately there was no respondent among the two hundred sample students who confidently understood everything while the teacher explains the lesson only in English. Only 14.5% of the students agreed with it. On the contrary, majority of the students replied negatively. 69% of the students disagreed and 13.5% of the students strongly disagreed with it.

But while the students were asked the 24th question of the students’ general questionnaire (i.e. do you understand when the teacher explains the lesson in English and your mother tongue?), the response of the students were highly satisfactory. 30.5% of the students strongly agreed and 67.5% of the students agreed with it. Only 2% of the students disagreed and there were no respondents who strongly disagreed with it. The data are presented in the following table (table no.9).

Table 9: Students' English Language Proficiency and Use of Mother Tongue

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	61	30.5
2	Agree	135	67.5
3	Uncertain	0	0
4	Disagree	4	2
5	Strongly disagree	0	0
6	Total	200	100

Table 10: The Effectiveness of Classroom Teaching

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly agree	42	21
2	Agree	110	55
3	Uncertain	5	2.5
4	Disagree	43	21.5
5	Strongly disagree	0	0
6	Total	200	100

The above mentioned table indicates the quality and effectiveness of teaching English in the classroom. Majority of the students believed that if the existing text books were taught properly, they would be able to improve their English language proficiency. There were 21% students who strongly agreed and 55% students who agreed with it. Only 21.5% of the students disagreed with it and there was not even a single respondent who strongly disagreed with it.

'Does your English teacher speak English in the classroom?' was another question the students were asked to answer. This was intended to know the amount of exposure to English the students got in the classroom. The responses received are presented in the following table.

Table 11: Exposure of English Language in the Classroom

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Always	43	21.5
2	Sometime	55	27.5
3	Often	88	44
4	Rarely	14	7
5	Not at all	0	0
6	Total	200	100

The above mentioned table shows that only 21.5% of the teachers always speak English in the English class. 27.5% of the teachers' sometime 44% teachers' often and only 7% of the teachers rarely speak English in the English class. No English teacher was found who never spoke English in the classroom. Thus, the table reflects that the teachers who could work as one of the agents to improve the students' listening skill, have failed to do so, probably because they do not have well developed skills, or they do not feel it imperative to take some extra care to develop their speaking skill.

In response to the question 'how often does your teacher speak Assamese language in the English class?' surprisingly most of the students responded affirmatively. Most of the teachers regularly use Assamese language in the English class. The range of use Assamese language (mother tongue) by the English teachers in the classroom is presented in the table below.

Table 12: Use of Assamese Language (Mother Tongue) in the English Classroom

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Always	134	67
2	Sometime	49	24.5
3	Often	15	7.5
4	Rarely	2	1
5	Not at all	0	0
6	Total	200	100

Table no. 12 reveals the truth that 67% of the English teachers always use Assamese language in the English class to make the students understand the textual matter. Further, 24.5% of the teachers speak sometime and 7.5% teachers use it often. Remarkably, no teacher was found who never used Assamese language in his/her English class.

Table 13: Communicative Activities Organized by the Teacher

Sl. no.	Rating	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Always	0	0
2	Sometime	13	6.5
3	Often	8	4
4	Rarely	11	5.5
5	Not at all	168	84
6	Total	200	100

Table no. 13 indicates that most of the students admit that their teachers do not organize any communicative activity in the English class. No teacher was found who regularly organized such communicative activities which are an important part of language teaching and can be an effective means of exposure to the language. Only 6.5% of the students felt that their teachers organized sometimes and 5.5% felt that their teachers organized such communicative activities rarely. 84% of the students felt that their teachers never organized any communicative activity. Thus, it becomes evident that the students' source of exposure is limited to the prescribed English textbook and to some extent to the English teachers who are a bit interested in creating English speaking environment at least inside the classroom.

Suggestions

1. Since the exposure to English for the Assamese medium students is very much limited to their practice within the classroom, special classes should be arranged for spoken English either after school or within the school hour.

2. Evaluation system should be made a continuous process with unit test, project, home assignment and oral examination, so that the evaluation system should cover all the language skills equally. At present the only assessment that matters is the year end examination administered by the Assam Higher Secondary Education Council.

3. The school library should be equipped with English language learning materials like books magazines, audio cassettes, CDs etc. on singing, grammar, phonetics, word drill etc. teachers' resource books, guides, dictionary, pronouncing dictionary etc. should be made available to all English teachers.

4. Grants should be allotted to schools for purchasing audio-visual aids and other materials to supplements the English language learning.

5. The English textbook of 12th standard which is originally prepared by NCERT and has been adopted by Assam Higher Secondary Education Council should help develop all the language skills and practical application of English in their day to day activities.

6. The lessons in English should be prepared with the quality of internal consistency and logical development and should contain within them possibilities of interlinking themselves with the preceding as well as succeeding lessons.

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