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English among the Underprivileged A Case Study of the Linguistic Minority Learners in West Odisha

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Abstract

English language education has been spreading faster to different parts of our country in recent years. It has percolated even to the interior regions and has been welcomed by almost all sections of our society.

There have been pressures on the state governments by the deprived sections to introduce English as a medium at the primary level. Are the schools meant for the deprived sections of society ready to meet such a demand in terms of materials, method and physical infrastructure?

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The objective of this paper is to make a survey of English language education in such a context. It also seeks to discuss what kind of impact it will have on the indigenous languages and cultures. Will they be endangered with the dominant presence of English? Or can the indigenous languages coexist with English by playing a positive role in the teaching and learning of English.

The paper reports two experiments which show that integration of English language education with indigenous languages can yield good results.

In such a context, it is worth studying the challenges and possibilities English can offer to the learners, their culture and languages.

Introduction

This paper makes a survey of teaching and learning situation in the interior parts of West Odisha to make a study of the teaching-learning situations of the underprivileged children at the High School levels and suggests ways of overcoming some of the problems faced by these learners. It makes a case study of the learners coming from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in West Odisha and proposes that the learners' language as well as cultural resources should be integrated in the pedagogy. Such a strategy will make language education effective. In addition the pedagogic reform, the paper also suggests measures for improvement at the institutional levels.

Assumptions of the Paper

The paper is based on the following assumptions that there is a tremendous pressure from the underprivileged parents and intellectuals like Chandrabhan Prasad (qtd. in Graddol 2010:65) and Kanch Illaiah (2010) on English language education (even though there is limited infrastructure and preparedness). As a result several states have introduced English at the primary level and others are going to introduce such schemes in future. Orissa has introduced English as a required subject at the primary level. English education, thus, is made available to the inaccessible regions, aligning English with indigenous languages and cultures. This is bound to play a key role in the life and careers of the deprived people in these regions.

Questions to Ask

Under the above mentioned assumptions, what kinds of measures are to be taken to provide favourable conditions for learning English? What kinds of measures should be taken so that the indigenous languages can play an active role along with English to nurture the heart and mind of the children?

Possible Measures

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The paper suggests measures at two broad levels:

- A. Pedagogical
- B. Institutional

These two may overlap at times. These measures are the outcome of field study, personal experience and theoretical and practical input received from different sources.

A. Pedagogical

If we are keen to impart English language education to the marginalized children, we need to take care of two important things: create favourable teaching and learning conditions and adopt suitable pedagogic processes.

We can give English language education to our children at the same time we may retain our local languages. It is possible to achieve this end if we teach them English through their first language. This is also a necessary pedagogical step for them, as most of their families or the localities may context to use the language they learn at school. At the same time, this would also help ensure that these children not ignore their own language and forms of culture.

How to integrate the child's language and English language education is an important subject and there are several possibilities. I would like to suggest that the native language and forms of culture can play a positive role in the process of English language education. I would like to suggest strategies, particularly methods and materials for this. I would also like to propose some other measures to make English education more effective among the underprivileged learners from Orissa.

Socio-Cultural Profile

In this paper I use the term *underprivileged* for the members of the Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes. They have limited social, economic and educational accessibility. They include several castes and tribes such as Gonda, Ghasi, Chamar, Keont, Gond, Binjhal, Saora, and so on. Their literacy level is very low. "The crude literacy rate (the percentage of literates in the total population for STs is 38.41% compared to 54.51% for the total population and 45.20% for SCs." (Mohanty 2009: 282).

The children coming from such communities are mostly first generation learners. These communities inhabit the western regions of Orissa bordering Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand. They live in the districts of Sambalpur, Bargarh, Nuapada, Deogarh, Sundargarh, Balangir and Kalahandi. There is a strong demand for English by the parents though the quality of English and general education provided is not satisfactory. Earlier English was taught from class VI and subsequently from class IV onwards. Now it is introduced in class III and taught as a compulsory

subject from class IV onwards. The government is also keen to provide education in English though schools lack adequate materials and teachers.

Reorienting Materials and Methods



We are aware that English education has long been the privilege of the elite class of our society. The methods and materials were drawn from the British model. But now the deprived classes also claim their right to English education. It is the fundamental right of a child to get education. In such a situation the method and materials are to be re-oriented.

When our goal is to give these children education in English we need to be sensitive to their socio-cultural milieu. Our methods and materials should be in tune with their cultural context.

The first important step should be toward integrating learners' cultural resources with the goals of language education. As we know, these children come to school with a lot of cultural resources. The children's culture in these regions is rich in oral traditions which include songs, tales, music, games and so on. They have a distinct way of learning these traditions. It is important to observe how they learn their traditional forms of culture.

Following indigenous methods of learning, we should orient our materials and methods accordingly in teaching English.

My Experiment and the Profile of Learners

I conducted an experiment with such learners and used their cultural resources to teach English and the materials were proved to be effective.

The children from this community are mostly first generation learners and dialect speakers. These learners are also linguistic minorities as "their home language being very different from

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the language of instruction at school” (Jhingran 2009: 254). The parents work as small scale farmers, wage earners or petty government servants. They are very rich in terms of their culture. As their home language is different from the language of instruction at school, they face learning disadvantages.

Sadananda Meher, in a paper titled “Problems of Sambalpuri Dialect Users in Learning English” observes that learners find it difficult to cope with the text books meant for them. Even the link language, i.e., standard Oriya which should mediate between their home language and English fails to perform its role as they are not familiar with the world and world view it represents. On the other hand, the first language which has shaped their attitude, knowledge and world view and which brings a lot cultural resources is kept aside in the process of teaching and learning. When we use forms of culture of the learners in English language education, it is found to be motivating and effective.

Design and Details of My Experiment

I prepared a set of materials including songs and tales drawn from their own culture as samples and tried them among seventh class students of a School in the Bargarh district of Orissa and received positive and encouraging feed- back. A sample of the questionnaire has been appended.

When the stories and songs were given to the students, they were happy to find that their stories and songs were found in their lessons. They said that they were familiar with such tales and songs. They also expressed happiness that they are familiar with the materials. They said, “We know the song. We know story.”

This familiarity is a motivating factor. We can build up their interest from this motivation point. Children also expressed their desire to have lessons of this kind in their text books. The materials were tried among similar group of learners in the Nuapada district and proved to be very effective. A significant difference was observed in the performance of the learners when materials based on their culture were used. There was an improvement in learners’ performance after the materials were used.

The sample of the study included five students from Scheduled Castes from a small village school. The study was conducted in class VIII. All of them were about thirteen year old.

A pre-test was conducted and the scores of the students were recorded. Then the materials were taught to them for eight days one hour per day. The materials were based on folktales, songs, riddles, proverbs and games drawn from their culture. These were taught in bilingual/ multilingual method. After eight sessions another test (post-test) was conducted to know their scores. The table represents their scores.

It may be noticed that the students scored higher than their previous scored and showed better performance. They sang the song in Sambalpuri then the same song was given to them in English

and they were asked questions or there were discussions in English and Sambalpuri. This shows that the materials drawn from their cultural resources have been effective in developing different language skills.

We can see that the materials drawn from the learners' background not only enhance learners' language skills but also serve as our attempt towards preserving their culture and language.

Pre-Test and Post-Test Comparison of Scores

Sl. No	Name	Pre-test	Post test	Difference
1.	Suryakanti Jagat	2	11.5	9.5
2.	Mukesh Bhoi	3.5	13	10
3.	Dhanmati Harijan	2	9	7
4.	Kamalinee Bag	5.5	11.5	7
5.	Manoj Bag	4	14.5	10.5

Hence, we would like to suggest that the child's first language should be involved in their learning as it is the right of the child and also it facilitates learning. I also like to add that indigenous languages along with their state language could be integrated into English language education and all of them can coexist and make multilingual education possible. Robert Phillipson after surveying the position of English in Indian educational set up suggests that: "The project of increasing the learning and use of English represents a threat to other cultural values unless education is organized so as to build on the languages and cultures that children bring with them to school, after which other languages can be acquired additively" (92) .

Similar experiments have been carried out "in government schools for tribal children in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and about to start in Chhatisgarh and other states with very high tribal population"(Mohanty 2009: 295).

Localizing Pedagogy by Using the Learners' Cultural Resources

When we say localize pedagogy, we mean use the learners' language and local knowledge in the process of educating them. Scholars and Commissions, Unions and organizations across the world have been advocating this. We may include scholars such as D.P. Pattanayak, Jim Cummins, Tove Stutnabb Kangas, Ajit Mohanty in the list. We may take examples of *Curriculum Framework 2005* which proposed to connect learners' local knowledge with pedagogy:

The oral lore and traditions of craft are a unique intellectual property, varied and sophisticated, preserved by innumerable groups in our society, including women,

marginalized and communities, and tribal people. By including these in the curriculum for all children, we could provide them with windows of understanding and kernels of ideas, skills and capabilities that could enrich their own lives and society. School privileges the literate, but cannot afford to continue to ignore the oral. Sustaining oral skills of all kinds is important. (NCF 2005: 27)

Another way is to use the child's first language in educating them. This will not only give them a sense of ownership, but help in developing their cognitive abilities. The U. N. Council on the Rights of the Indigenous People (2007) also provides for the effectiveness of teaching in the mother tongue. The Knowledge Commission also proposes to give regards to the beliefs, customs and institutions of the indigenous people. In spite of all these recommendations and possibilities of pedagogic benefits for the child, the child's language and cultural resources are not included in the language learning process.

Multiplicity of Communities and Language Diversity

A question may be asked as to there are so many communities and regions representing their cultures. Can the textbooks include all of them? Secondly, there already exists a prescribed textbook. Is there any way out for the teacher to include materials outside the prescribed text book?

The response to the first question will be that we need to be sensitive to such cultures and languages and try out possibilities of using them through various ways. If we can't have regular class using a particular form of culture or language, still it may be possible to use them occasionally in groups, through projects, discussions or through any other activities. If we raise awareness, even the text books will take these aspects into consideration and include them. The CBSE text books have many such forms.

The response to second question will be that if the text book does not include them, we can always supplement it with locally prepared materials.

How to Use Culture and Linguistic Forms?

Here an attempt has been made to share how these forms could be used in the language classroom. This has been already experimented by the researcher as a scaffolding strategy and found to be very effective.

Children feel happy when they have something they are familiar with. They said "Oh, we know the story, we know the song." Such familiarity draws their interest and motivates them to learn. They even expressed their desire to have such stories and songs in their text books. It has been reported in the form of an article "Using Indigenous Oral Narratives as Scaffolding in L2 Learning" (Mahanand 2010: 141).

Recommendations

These are a few possibilities which could be adopted. I have adopted them and they proved to be effective. This attempt does not intend to show that this is the only method available. This also does not mean to replace the existing text books or syllabus. On the other hand, this is just a possibility for scaffolding or providing support for a time being without disturbing the existing materials and methods. Once the learners have a feel for English, the support can be withdrawn. If these forms are not relevant or not accessible these will certainly provide clues to teachers to explore and use resources from their own working contexts. Language experts (e.g. J. Willis: 1996) suggest that learners need three important conditions for language learning which include motivation, exposure and opportunity.

1. Motivation

Claims are made that English is one of the Indian languages and learners are familiar with it. People do use a few words as part of everyday conversation, but when it comes to using English substantially, it is found to be awkward. The fear, stigma and shyness, inhibitions should be done away with. Once two friends in a rural setting decided to speak only in English from a particular day, but they found that they could not speak a single word to each other till evening. Efforts are to be made to break the notion that English is a difficult language and difficult to learn. Learners should be encouraged to use it at ease and should not be penalized or insulted if they make errors.

2. Exposure

Underprivileged learners come from a deprived background. They lack exposure to literacy both in their second language and English. They lack children's literature, audio-visuals, newspaper. Radio, T.V. programmes, computer, Internet facilities, etc., should be used to give them more exposure. Efforts should be made to make all these available at least in the school. Students are very resourceful in terms of their cultural resources, including songs, stories, games etc. These can be used in their original form or adapted to different forms of technology including print, computer, film and multimedia and made available for students and teachers' use.

3. Opportunities

Learners should be given a lot of opportunity to use English inside and outside the classroom. Events like loud reading, reading sessions, debate, radio talk, presentation, drama, essay writing competitions should be organized to provide them opportunities. These activities are efficiently conducted in very good English medium schools, but in rural schools in remote places these remain a distant dream. In addition to these, some material incentives should be given to them to relieve them from their family work.

4. Extensive Reading

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As mentioned earlier these learners lack opportunity for learning even though they have motivation. It is our duty to provide literature for reading. Books and other forms of reading materials should be made available to them to read during and outside library hours. The English teacher should plan with the learners how many books they would read during an academic year.

5. Teacher Development

Earlier English was introduced at the Upper Primary and High School levels. There would be an English teacher at that level would be a trained graduate and had some exposure to English as a Method subject. In the present context, when English is introduced at the primary level, teachers (there is no subject teacher at this level) are not equipped with the methods and materials. The advantage, however, here is the child will spend more years with English. Hence teacher development and equipping the teacher with language skills become necessary and should be viewed as a continuous process. In addition to this, it is required to take the teacher into confidence, involving them throughout the process. If it is not done, the materials and methods, even though they are good, the teachers may not use them and go on their own old ways. This happened in Karnataka State Board. It was proposed to teach learners at the primary level with listening and speaking skills instead of teaching them letters of alphabet in the initial stage, but the teachers did not adopt the new method and continued teaching in their old method.

B. Institutional Level

In addition to the above mentioned pedagogic measures, we need to take steps at the institutional levels too.

1. Provide infrastructure to ensure quality

When the underprivileged are asking for English education for their children, they are not just asking for introduction of English as a medium for the purpose of data, but for ensuring quality education for the deprived. It has been found that though the state governments have quickly introduced English at the primary level, they have not ensured or done so in a manner to provide quality materials and teachers. Teachers teaching the children are not qualified.

A NCERT survey (1982) reveals that most of the teachers teaching at the primary level have passed just the 10th class. Some of them have studied up to the Intermediate level. A few of them are graduates and a very few of them have teacher training.

Teachers' development and training is essential. It is interesting to see how quality and the cash nexus works. The more deprived our learners are, the more deprived they are in getting quality education in terms of materials, exposure and teaching. Here teachers, materials, methods, infrastructure and also students lack standard and hence all need improvement. In high class

schools, however all these have higher standards. Priority should be given to the neglected and deprived schools particularly for their physical improvement.

According to the Fourth All India Educational Survey (1982), 40 percent of all primary school had no blackboards, 53 percent had no play space, 71 per cent had no libraries and 57 percent were without concrete structures” (qtd. in Kumar 38). The government of Orissa has introduced certain measure like providing school uniform and bicycle to girl students. Much needs to be done.

2. Activate ELTIs and District Centres

The English Language Teaching Institutes and District Centres should play an active role for ensuring teacher development and material preparation. It is sad to note that District Centres are yet to be opened in many districts of the region we are discussing. The ELTI’s functioning was adversely affected as it was left without a regular Director and lack of adequate number of teaching staff.

3. Ensure Quality at Ashram Schools

There are a number of ashram schools meant for the SC/ST students. They are like the Social Welfare Schools in Andhra Pradesh. However, the facilities given to the students and quality of education there is quite below standard. There are reports of students going back home as they don’t get food to eat and the residents find the facilities there insufficient to live. The Kasturba Gandhi Awasika Vidyalayas (Kasturba Gandhi Residential Girls High Schools) meant to stop dropouts among girls have been running well in certain areas. But it should not be confined to particular regions.

4. Provide Residential Facilities

As we have seen, most of the learners come from deprived background.

Some are made to work after class. They don’t have facilities to study at home. If they are given residential facilities they can spend more time in their study. If we can’t open good schools for them, we can at least have hostels with adequate facilities near these schools. They can learn from their peers and teachers. They will also have a lot of exposure to English language through books, newspapers, magazine, TV, Radio, computer, etc.

Some of the missionary schools in Sundargarh district have been doing a commendable job of this kind for the tribal children. They run many good quality hostels and schools. These schools are able to provide quality education and are successful in developing students’ all round development.

The missionary schools in North East India are also able to produce students who are highly proficient in English. It is worth exploring how they develop learners' English maintaining their indigenous languages.

5. Involvement of Community

Involvement of the community is a necessary requirement at all levels of decision making. The community should also cooperate and contribute to the education of the child by motivating them, by making them aware of the benefit of education and by being vigilant. Wherever it is feasible it can maintain community library, sports and other activities. Certain agencies help in managing libraries through volunteers' donation of books and services. Members of the local communities should collaborate with agencies like Children Book Trust and National Book Trust, India for facilitating book reading habits among children.

6. Support Private English Medium Schools

Earlier the learners in English medium schools came from the elite class. But now English has moved from classes to masses. We find a number of Dalit children studying in private English medium schools that exist in slums and rural areas. Parents of such learners are low paid employees, labourers, technical or semi-technical employees and workers. Such schools should be supported by the governmental and non-governmental organizations.

7. Strengthen Proficiency in First/Second Language as well

A senior teacher and administrator once pointed out to me that there is a need to teach to learners skills even in their first or second language. Concepts are taught following the humanist classical method just giving a few commentaries. These concepts are not transferred as skills. Michael West as well as Jim Cummins pointed out if a learner is good in one language; it is easier for them to be proficient in another language. Language and literary skills can be transferred.

For instance, the learners have the skills of planning, organization of paragraph as part of their writing skills in their first language. When we teach them writing in a second language, we may not have to work for developing those skills, as they already have them. Only they need to transfer them to English. In the same way, when they read a story in English, their familiarity with the different aspects of a story (e.g. theme, characters, storyline) they have learned in their first language will help them to read and interpret the story better.

Hence, efforts should be made to make the learners proficient in their first/second languages too. For the learners coming from tribal and dialect speakers' background, the first language is different from the state language. Special care needs to be taken to include these languages in English language education. Multilingual education will be a possible approach here. Special sessions for such students can be organized regularly. In certain areas where there is adequate number of such language users, the school syllabus can follow a multilingual approach. As

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pointed out earlier, certain schools in tribal regions in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa have been following this approach for a long time.

8. Sincere Interest

All should show genuine interest for such constructive work. Intellectuals, politicians, policy makers, teachers and successful leaders from this community and well wishers from other communities should come forward and give their heart and mind to make the children achieve the goal. There should be also extensive research on the issues of Dalit learners. There is hardly done anything so far. There should be seminars, monitoring of programmes and deliberations on different issues pertaining to the Dalit and tribal people and English. If all of us take initiatives, we will be able to give the gift of English to our Dalit and tribal learners and empower them with English. It is good that some positive developments have taken place in the school education sector such as the right to education, introduction of English language education, and the Sarva Siksha Andolan. All aim at inclusion of the excluded. The stakeholders should collaborate and derive maximum benefit of the opportunities available to them in educating the deprived Dalit and tribal children.

Conclusion

The paper suggests that there is a need to improve quality both at the pedagogic and institutional levels. Learners' first language and their forms of culture should be used to facilitate language education. "English teaching cannot be monolingual ... In multilingual societies; multiple languages can be used to communicate in the classroom" (qtd. in Graddol 119). Diverse approaches are required to be used. In addition to this, a lot of efforts are to be taken for the improvement at the institutional levels. Teacher development, regular monitoring of programmes and their implementation may help. It also states that though English language education is being aspired by the underprivileged sections, adequate measures are needed to provide them with quality education. Mere use of slogans and rhetoric will not help in improving the quality of education. A sustained and systematic strategy is required. Government organizations, NGOs, researchers, intellectuals, activists - all should join hands to make their critical and creative contributions.

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Appendix Questionnaire

1. Did you like the lessons? Yes/No
2. Why did you like them?
 - a. because we knew the stories
 - b. they were easy
 - c. they were taught using our language.
3. Do you want to have more lessons like these in your English text book?
Yes/No
4. Do listen to such stories, songs and games in your village? Yes/No
5. Can you sing these songs and tell the stories? Yes/No

Thank you

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