

English Language Teaching to Rural Students: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract:

India is facing a serious issue of poor quality of education and there is no exception to language teaching, particularly for English language. Conditions became unmanageable in rural areas where as poor quality of English language teaching adversely affecting the growth of rural students and mar their chance of success in highly competitive world. They bear the burden of failure of education system. Reasons of incompetency of rural students in use of English language goes beyond the geographical boundaries: pedagogical issue, lack of motivation, poor training of teachers, urban centric curriculum and state apathy are the major hurdle in development of English language competency among rural students. Acquisition of mother tongue is natural phenomenon but learning of secondary language can be hampered by social, cultural background and level of awareness of students. Present paper focuses on the problem of rural student by analysing critical factors and temperamental difference between students of two different localities.

Keywords: English Language, Teaching, Rural Students, Difficulties, Pedagogy, Cultural Background, Learning Environment.

Introduction:

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” – Frank Smith

Frank Smith a contemporary psycholinguist aptly points out the importance of learning secondary language in life. Knowledge of secondary language, particularly English, improves chance of employability and success in career. It has been widely acknowledged that students of rural area lack competency in English language. Language incompetency of rural students due to failure of education system is a kind of injustice to them. Their right to live happy and dignified life has been usurped due to inadequate resources and infrastructure

provided by state. Their position is alike to Caliban, an imaginary creation of William Shakespeare. Caliban might have lived happily if his island has not been occupied by an English-speaking Prospero who created problem of communication for him by talking in a language alien to him. Condition of underprivileged students of India is just like Caliban who struggle to learn English language to enhance their personality and chance of employability in the fast-changing world. Though it is very difficult to legitimise the definition of 'underprivileged' and the term used here refers to the students of rural areas as they have less resources in comparison of their urban peers.

Objectives:

- I. Identifying social and cultural factors affecting language learning
- II. Language policy and Teaching learning resources
- III. Decoding pedagogical issues
- IV. Remedial Measures

Social and cultural factors affecting language learning

Language learning is complex mechanism affected by factors like social and cultural etc. Social and cultural practices of any society play pivotal role in language learning in acquisition of primary language and secondary language learning. Cultural and social practices of any society define learners' tendency and attitude towards secondary language learning. English language has been widely accepted as a language of opportunity in India but rural community is yet to understand the importance of English language as resource. English is still perceived as a language of elite in rural community. Ideologically it is believed that men can overcome all the problems of life irrespective of their position in society but influence of social and cultural background cannot be overlooked in learning of secondary language. English language was once the language of colonizers so rural community is yet to develop positive attitude towards English language. Rural community views English language learning process as an interference in their cultural practice and give importance to their mother tongue. This attitude also prevails among educators who do not treat English language at par with their mother tongue. G. Chandralekha Rao talks about the dominance of regional language, which acts as a hurdle in learning "There are still many students, who due to their regional language chauvinism, do not allow the others to use English." (Rao,16) Temperamental difference is directly related to learning outcome, as considerable difference can be seen in a language competency of rural and urban students.

Majority of Indian students come from agrarian society who do not realise the importance of learning English language in school days and maintain a distance from it. There can be multiple reasons of the calculative distance but lack of environment has major contribution in development of negative approach in students towards learning. Lack of conducive environment and proper training results in incompetency among rural students and they develop hostile and escapist attitude towards English language. To justify their negative attitude, they used to give lame excuses and undermine the importance of learning English language by creating behavioural roadblock. Their approach to English language marred by their cultural and community practices as their community prefer to communicate in their native tongue and their learning of secondary language in schools remains confined to their classrooms and private chambers only. Any attempt to use it in community is mocked by other members. Fear of being mocked, develops a sense of anxiety among learners, resulting in low confidence to use it publicly. Lack of environment to use it in community encourages them to develop false notion that they need not bother about learning English language. Their mother tongue is capable enough to empower them. Such notion adversely affects their ability to learn secondary language. Temperamental and cultural problems can be easily managed by adopting appropriate strategy and planning. Formal training of students can play a major role in language learning.

Language policy and Teaching learning resources:

Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution comprises of twenty-two Indian languages which constitute mother tongue of “..96.71 per cent population in the country ...” (More than) but English is second most spoken language in India after Hindi. English is mostly spoken as the second or the third language. The inference is very clear that English enjoys the status of acquired language and generally learnt after acquisition of first language. Since English is not scheduled language but an official language of union along with Hindi, it did not receive same treatment from governance in term of promotion due to education policy of different states. Since states cannot deny its importance due to its international stature and market reach but political ideologies always act as barrier in promotion of English language. States always remain in dilemma regarding the promotion of the English over and above Indian language. Though three languages formula has been proposed in National Policy on Education 1968 “At the secondary stage, the State Governments should adopt, and vigorously implement, the three-language formula” (MHRD, 40) but most of the states failed to implement it and preferred the medium of instruction in their vernacular language. Students

receiving education in their vernacular language fail miserably in higher education which mostly prefers English as medium of instruction. Growth of English languages in India largely depends on the private schools which are mostly located in the city. Educational need of rural students is catered by government run schools which fails to deliver substantial results due dilemma of state policies. A national representative sample survey conducted by Lok Foundation and Oxford University found that “English is far more an urban than a rural phenomenon; just 3% of rural respondents said that they could speak English, as against 12% of urban respondents.” (Rukmini) Urban students are well placed due availability of private schools while states run schools do not have adequate infrastructure and policy to promote English language learning. Frequent change in education policy and lack of political will push rural students at receiving end.

Decoding pedagogical issues:

Surveys and researches highlight poor English language skills of rural students. Pathetic performance of rural students questions the validity of pedagogical approach adopted in teaching of English language and it compel us to redefine our strategy of teaching of secondary language. The fact that English language has emerged as an international language must be kept in mind and its importance cannot be ignored any more. Habit of overlooking the importance of English in twenty first century can be dangerous practice as it minimises the chance of growth in cosmopolitan world, forcing students have to make compromises in technology driven economy. Their inefficiency in use of English pushes them at periphery in digital world, as most of the technological knowledge is available in English language. Feeling of being cornered in fast changing economy negatively affects their perception for learning. They are haunted by questions like ‘is it necessary to learn English?. ‘can one survive without it?’. A simple answer, English is an international language, is not enough to encourage rural students for language learning because they are not familiar with the concept of internationalism as they generally do not wish to cross the boundary of their states. How it is possible to convince students with a concept totally alien to them. It is advisable to teachers that they should not impose language as a subject to learn. Imposition develops negative attitude in learners.

Learning is a lifelong process which starts with birth of child but formal learning of child begins on the very first day of class. Children come to class as a blank slate, can easily be directed for any kind of learning by giving proper guidance and motivation. Human brain

is wired in such a way that it can learn any language without prejudice if guided strategically. Researches prove that results of those schools improved positively which adopted motivational method because “It is kind of driving force that constantly remains operational at psychological level in an individual who sets a goal and try to achieve it.” (Mouda & Sharma,³) Language competency of students of the schools lacking trained teachers and facility found poor in comparison to be poor. Schools of rural areas generally lack basic amenities and trained teachers in the field of English language teaching. Lack of infrastructure and trained teachers place them at the bottom line. It also questions the validity of effort of state and its commitment to the upliftment of rural students. Sincere assessment of the problem of English language teaching to rural students points out towards the area of pedagogical concern:

- I. Teacher training and rural students’ requirement.
- II. Suitability of curriculum.
- III. Motivation for English language learning.

Questions raised by researchers remain apparent and unanswered since the announcement of education policy of independent India. Though Indian Education system has witnessed considerable growth and students of premier institutes like IIT, IIM and ‘A’ grade universities have caught the attention of international community, which looks India as country of hardworking students. But our policy makers have failed to address the basic problems of underprivileged and rural students. Failure to address issues has paralysed education system of rural India. It is not simply a matter of language learning. It is a failure as system and cure of these problems could not be found until we redesign our strategy of human resource development. Importance of good teachers cannot be undermined at any level of teaching and learning process. Teachers’ training in India is in abysmal state and it does not empower teachers to act as autonomous language trainer. Common training is given to every teacher systematically overlooking the skills required for language teacher. Teachers are not developed as competent language trainer so they lack necessary skill to handle the problems of rural students. General teaching methods applied by teachers among rural students are bound to fail as these approaches are developed while keeping in mind urban students. Policy maker must understand that making uniform policy of teachers’ training cannot give desired result due specific need of rural population and their approach to foreign language.

It is high time to reevaluate curriculum of teachers' training programme to train them to fulfil the need of rural students because these students need special care and attention of teachers during their study. As for as the training of language teaching is concerned the teachers should be trained to develop language related tools and game to teach underprivileged students. The target can be achieved by making it compulsory for teachers to develop communicative skills of their pupil at all level of teaching. They should "...think of the means to get every group involved in the learning process and taste joy of learning." (Joseph,5) Paper of communicative skills should be integral part of teachers' training curriculum than simply teaching English as a subject of training module. Simon G. Bernabas emphasises on the need of proper orientation of teachers to make them good E L T practitioner "Let us first train our primary teachers to be efficient users of English with the assistance of modern multimedia facilities. Let them also be trained to use the media effectively in their classrooms. Let the same practice be continued through the high school and, if necessary, through the college." (Bernabas, 304) Multi layered strategy can help us to manage the problem effectively.

Learning of English language is not a private affair as it is governed by state policy which controls its curriculum and design. Uniform curriculum is implemented as per the choice of states and Central board of education but uniform curriculum is more align towards the students of urban space because states remain reluctant to acknowledge the poor learning outcome of rural school. It throws challenges for rural students as they have to read the curriculum which is not designed while keeping their needs in the mind. They find lesson and content of such books alien to their imagination and they feel disconnected with what is being taught in schools. Disconnect between curriculum and cultural practices acts as road block in learning of the language. Need for curriculum reform vigorously felt by scholars. G. Chandralekha Rao in his research paper suggested that "Workshops curriculum reforms are necessary to make the course in English skill-based and need based" (Rao,19) Designing curriculum of English language teaching for Indian students is a challenging task because of uniform policy for curriculum but there is no equality in infrastructure in schools. Problems of urban and rural students are not similar in nature. So, it is very difficult to solve them by applying a uniform policy.

Motivational strategy adopted for English language teaching need close examination. Knowledge of English language is primarily concerned with career prospects while communication need is fulfilled by mother tongue. Career prospects is chief motivating factor

in English language learning which works as stimulator for students but the teachers of rural India lack adequate skills to use career prospects as an stimulator for language learning. They fail to do so due to their limited knowledge and exposure to fast changing world and economy. We need to train our teachers in way that they can guide and motivate students to take new fields as their career option. Apathy of trainee teachers for career counselling and communicative skills hamper the growth of pupils as they do not get proper stimulation from teachers who put all the blame on and state “...many of their students are not sufficiently motivated because not all of them go for higher education. Also, they do not see the usefulness or relevance of English in their immediate environment.”⁴(Seshadri, 206) It is also observed that majority of teachers came from middle class society and their career aspiration remains limited. In classroom they only talk about jobs which do not require great communication skills. Learning of English language and career is correlated issue. A teacher having training of career counselling can better encourage students to learn English language.

Measure to be taken:

There is considerable shift in approach of rural society regarding the importance of education and learning of English language. Enrolment ration of students in rural area has been improved significantly and growth of English medium schools has caught the momentum. This cultural and social shift in rural society should be used as a reinforcement to ease the anxiety of students about the English language. Unnecessary hype has been created regarding English language in our society makes rural students feel inferior and affect their learning ability. They feel that it is a language of elite class so they cannot master it. Care must be taken while giving the lecture about the importance of English in life. Facts should be presented in a way that English language can be an asset for their future. Native language should be used as facilitator agent in learning of secondary language

Policy makers should understand the importance of English language and its wide acceptability at international level. State must come with a well-planned policy for English language learning and all such policy should be free from political influences. There should be an English language commission to formulate curriculum and assessment method to certify language competency attribute of learners. Teaching of language and literature should be separated to focus on language competency of learner. Block level committee of teachers of higher education should be constituted to monitor progress of English language learning of

rural students. Online examination should be conducted to assess the level of learners to minimise malpractices in assessment of learners' ability.

Multimedia rich content should be used to show them the growth of world and human society but the content of media should be selected carefully as rural students would not be interested in knowing a story of an English boy. Characters must be selected from their background and success story of rural students should be part of the content used for teaching. While using multimedia content, teachers must remain alert towards their goal of language teaching. Teachers can explain multimedia content in a way that the students can understand the role, played by English language in success of the character. Media is very effective medium of communication and its use in teaching can generate interest of rural students in English. Once interest is generated nothing can hinder the process of language learning of rural students.

Training of teachers is another grey area which needs attention of policy makers and educationist. Teachers should be trained as language expert with rigorous training of various methods of language teaching. There should be specialised course for language teaching only. People holding such qualification should be given preference for the post of teacher of English. All such post of English teacher should be reclassified as English language teacher and teacher of literature so language teaching can be prioritise to improve language competency in rural areas. Language teachers must incentivise for their innovation to impart the English language skills among rural students. Promotion and recognition of teachers teaching in rural area should be part and parcel of policy because it will boost their moral to improve learning outcome.

Conclusion

Teaching of English language to rural students is the need of hour. They totally rely on government run schools due to financial constrain. State must respect their right to learn a language to maximise their opportunity and career growth. State should adopt multi facet approach to deal with the problems. Making robust policy with prime focus on the need of rural students is a first step to change the dynamics of training of teachers. Sensitisation regarding the urban and rural divide is another important measure to be taken at all the level of administration so their problems and need can be acknowledged. English language teachers and trainer from basic to higher education need to be brought on common platform to share their experiences and expertise to formulate better teaching strategy for rural

students. Further research is recommended in area of cognitive process, behaviourism and approach of rural students towards English language to understand their need to develop suitable curriculum and training module for both the trainer and learner.

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