



Research Paper

Challenges in Teaching English to Tribal Students: A study of Kalahandi District

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English as a second language is definitely a challenge for both the teachers and learners in a multilingual and multi-cultural setting. Teaching English to the students of diverse backgrounds where the students are unable to identify their first or second language needs an innovative approach for success.

This paper presents the difficulties in teaching English to the multilingual tribal students of the innermost parts of Kalahandi district of Odisha. These students are forced to learn four to five languages and the irony is that they do not get instruction in their mother tongue. Although English is taught as a second language in schools, it is their fourth language in practice.

The paper will focus on the need for the change of traditional teaching methods and materials for successful learning.

Key words: multicultural, multilingual, innovative, tribal, instruction, materials.

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I. Introduction:

In twenty first century, Majority of the people in the world are multilingual and multi-cultural. In a multilingual situation, many languages are acquired simultaneously for communication with the outside world along with the mother tongue. It is referred to as a many- many situations where even more than one second language or foreign language is acquired. The society where many cultures are amalgamated is known as a multi- cultural society, in which teaching second language experiences difficulties due to variation of cultures and languages in the classroom. Teaching a language to the multiple society of culture and languages needs a different approach although many scholars are of the opinions that L₂ or foreign language acquisition in a multilingual context is not very different from such acquisition in a monolingual context. To them, differences observed are not so much differences in kind but rather in degree.

India, a country known for her diversities in culture, language, tradition and diverse geographical locations, is the example of multiculturalism and multilingualism. India is said to be a socio-linguistic giant and the nerve system of this giant is multilingualism. Indian multilingualism is huge in size having 1620 mother tongues reduced to two hundred languages. India is not only multilingual but also multicultural too, having multiple religions, castes, sects, professions and life styles. Due to presence of multiple tongues in a class room; it is difficult to teach a second language or a foreign language to the students of different cultures and traditions.

Second language learning in a multiple context presents a challenge to varying groups of persons involved in the language teaching enterprise: the policy maker, the curriculum designer, the material writer, but, above all the teacher and the learner. One essential ingredient for success is a positive attitude to a multicultural context of language instruction. Among other aspects of language teaching in a multilingual society, attention must be focused on psyche-social problems of poor attitude, scant motivation and absence of opportunity for the teachers and the learners.

Care must be taken for effective and successful second language teaching in multilingual and multi-cultural classroom in which methods and materials play a significant role. The same principles and methods of monolingual and mono-cultural classrooms may not be applied to such classes for various reasons. Hence, the second language acquisition theories need to be modified for soothing the needs of the classrooms. No particular

method is applicable to the multilingual classrooms. In such a setting, there is the need to re-examine teaching methods and the production of teaching materials particularly for language teaching. In efficient language learning results in inefficient general learning.

The success of the language learners depends in the application of suitable method. Methods suffer due to two major weaknesses, either they are stereotyped, unimaginative and typical of years of entrenched practice or where the reliance is placed on modern methods, the approach tends to carry an unnecessary bias, given by the advocates of a particular method. This includes the various approaches to suit the particular needs and situations.

The paper advocates and supports the convergence approach for multicultural and multilingual students as no option is left for the effective outcome of the language teaching. The paper will also reflect the challenges in teaching English as a second language to the tribal students of Kalahandi, a backward district of Odisha, known for poverty and tribal population.

In India, English is being taught as a second language or a foreign language in most parts of India due to historical lineage. It does not require to justify the role of English in India as everybody is aware about it.

Teaching English as a second language to the aborigines or tribal people of India is a major challenge in the field of language teaching for various reasons which will be discussed in details in the paper. Schedule tribe people or Adivasis share a major percentage of Indian population and they are still segregated from the mainstream of Indian life. Modernity, technology and civilization are still away from the tribal societies as they live in difficult hilly areas which are not well connected by roads or rail. They live amidst nature surrounded by jungles and hills and love their culture and custom which do not allow them to change so easily. Tribal people are mainly uneducated, illiterate, and conservative and shy although they are known for their simplicity. Indian tribal people learn four to five languages for communication and medium of instruction which is indeed a major problem.

The paper has attempted to study the problems of the tribal students of Kalahandi district of Odisha and this will study the challenges in teaching English to the students of this backward district. Kalahandi is one of the tribal districts which is located in south-west part of Odisha. It belongs to the most backward region known as KBK (Kalahandi, -Bolangir-Koraput) region of the state.

Demographic characteristics of the district reflect that it is pre-dominantly rural and has a high concentration of weaker sections i.e. ST and SC communities. The literacy rate of the district is 60: 22 in 2011 against the state average of 73.5 percent. Both male and female literacy rates within ST communities are very less than the district average and those for the SC communities. The ST Concentration is 28.84 Percent of the total population of the district against 22.13 percent ST population at the state level.

Out of the forty six tribes found in the district the important ones are Banjara, Bhottad, Bhunjia, Paroja, Dal, Gond, Kandha, Mirdha, Munda and Shabar. These twelve tribes account for the 97% of the tribal population of the district. The concentration of ST population is nearly 56 percent of total population in Thuamul Rampur and Lanjigarh blocks. The literacy rate is very low in these blocks due to a number of factors such as income levels of the households, lack of connectivity, remoteness of habitation, attitude of the households towards education, gender and ST status, poor school infrastructure, teacher attendance and uninspiring and out of context syllabus.

Education in tribal dominated blocks is a failure for many reasons. The language is one of the barriers faced by the tribal children in their education. The difference in their mother tongue and medium of instruction makes their learning difficult. The tribal children learn approximately four languages for their survival. Apart from their mother tongue, the tribal language, they learn Kalahandia, a varied form of sambalpuri dialect for communication with the other people of the locality. Odia, the state official language and medium of instruction is imposed on them as a third language and then they learn Hindi and English as their fourth and fifth language respectively, although English is officially declared as the second language in the state. One can judge the predicament and burden of the students in learning these languages without having major supports of teachers, parents and materials. The irony is that when they do not understand or read Odia, the medium of instruction properly, how one can expect the effective learning of the so called second language 'English'. This gives additional stress to them and language learning fails as handling four to five languages at the same time results in multiple inter-language problems. As the students are from illiterate parents and poor economic background, they encounter innumerable problems while learning English or any other language. They feel de-motivated and hopeless while learning the foreign language. Even Odia is an alien language for them. The teachers who are from different cultures and advanced societies speak standard Odia and are inaccessible to the students. The students do not make out what teachers teach and they keep mum without clarifying their doubts because of fear and shy. The foreign language English remains indeed foreign to them. Neither the teacher nor the materials can help them as both are alien to the tribal students. The learner searches for the equivalence of the mother tongue in the target language but he is frustrated. The theme and culture projected in the texts are beyond perception of

the child resulting in de motivation in learning the language. The students of eight standards are not able to identify the alphabets and perceive the text.

The heavy contrast between the mother tongue and English is an important cause of learning difficulty. For these learners, the home local environment is not favourable to create linguistics bridge in the inter language process.

The teachers and the learners of English of tribal regions are faced with much different socio-cultural, economic and linguistic situation compared to the same folk of urban areas. Because of their cultural and geographical isolation, they hardly get an opportunity to interact with the people of other communities living particularly in urban areas. It gradually makes them homesick creating a psychological barrier in their motivation towards learning of English. These learners feel English as a language of elite class.

The author went to ThuamulRampur, a hilly and inaccessible place located 73 kilometres away from the headquarters of Kalahandi district to gather information from different high schools regarding difficulties in learning English. The findings have been given below to highlight the problems and their solutions.

II. Findings:

Twenty students of two high schools were interviewed for the purpose.

I. Out of twenty students fourteen students could not mention which is their first language and which is their second language.

II. The students expressed that they experienced some problems while learning English. They are:

a. They can not understand English words and hence they do not know how to read and write.

b. The courses are not completed because of absence of teacher in most of the days of the week.

c. The teachers are not taking proper care of the students in teaching English. No drills and repetitions are done in the class room.

d. They do not ask the teacher to clear their doubts out of fear.

e. They cannot go for tuition due to financial crisis.

III. Among twenty students only three can read properly. Ten students do not know how to read at all and seven students read incorrectly.

IV. Most of the parents want their children learn English as it has high value in the market. But they cannot guide them at home as they are illiterate and English is a foreign language to them. However, they acknowledge the need of learning the target language.

V. The teachers blame the parents for their apathetic attitude to the language acquisition of their children. They admit that classes are not being taken regularly because of engagement in non- teaching and shortage of teaching faculties.

Many other physical, psychological and cultural hindrances are there which create problems in teaching English to the tribal students of Kalahandi district.

The main hindrances are noted down below:

(1) The physical location of the villages: - The villages are scattered and most of villages have less than hundred populations. There are 74 villages in the Kalahandi district which do not have schools within one kilometre radius. There is also no proper connectivity.

(2) Negative attitude of the tribal parents: - Parents although want education of their children, they engage them in household works and neglect their studies.

(3) English Teachers and their attitude: - The relationship between teachers, and the villagers is not cordial. Villagers have practically no relation with the teachers. As teachers do not get proper accommodation in the village, they become irregular very often and this leads to non-completion of courses.

Another problem is to find suitable English teachers with requisite qualifications. The teachers engaged in these regions are frustrated and hence they do not pay heed to their professional development.

The only source that can directly help the children in learning English is the teacher, as the materials meant for them are beyond their perception. But these teachers have a pre-conceived notion about the tribal students that they cannot grasp anything beyond nature and forest. The teachers are of not much help to the students.

(4) Tribal students: Absence in classes is a major problem in teaching English. It is found from a survey that only 12% to 30% tribal children attend schools. This mass non-attendance is due to the following reasons.

a. Children help their parents at home.

b. No positive environment for learning is found at home.

c. Schools cannot create favourable environment for them. They feel uncomfortable in a foreign environment.

d. The content and language to the text books are beyond their comprehension.

e. School timing hampers their household work.

(5) Teaching learning materials: The text books prescribed for other students of high castes with good educational background are not suitable for these students. The educationists have neglected the tribal language

and culture and have ignored the problem of tribal children while framing books for them. These books are irrelevant and uninspiring for them.

(6) Poor economic conditions of parents: The children are not properly taken care of by the parents as they are very poor.

(7) Lack of motivation: Neither parents nor children are properly motivated for learning either by teachers, NGOs or govt. machinery. It appears as if no agency wants the improvement of tribal people and their education.

These challenges of learning English need to be dealt with by taking actions as suggested below.

(1) Strong motivation of students: The learners must be encouraged to learn English by explaining them the need of the acquisition of language. The motivation can be created by motivated and dedicated teachers, NGO's and other government machineries. Text books should be provided free of cost and teachers should take remedial classes for effective learning.

(2) Selection training and allowances to teachers: English teachers having requisite qualifications should be recruited. By giving attractive salaries and special allowances to teachers serving in tribal regions will motivate teachers to join hard stations. Training should be given to deal with the tribal children on a routine basis to improve the efficiency of the teachers. Priority should be given to local people with knowledge of tribal language in recruitment.

(3) Education in mother tongue: The students should be given teaching in their mother tongue till class-V to make them comfortable in the classroom as proposed by Govt. of India in 2008 under MLE. This will help in checking the dropouts of the children. In Odisha MLE is being implemented in 544 schools from 2009-2010 and tribal students are taught in their mother tongue by tribal teachers. This is a welcome step for their disadvantaged students.

(4) Change of syllabus / Curriculum: The textbooks need to be revised and rewritten for early comprehension of the tribal students.

(5) Convergence approach of teaching: Price (1991) remarks – The role of teachers is paramount in alleviating anxiety perhaps than a particular methodology. Teachers who provide a supportive and understanding environment, who employ non-threatening methods, and who use appealing and relevant topics seem to enhance the foreign language experience.

The method adopted in teaching English should be innovative and student friendly. It is a fact that the best method lies with the teacher.

It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers having the ability to experience and analyse both the home and target cultures (Byram & Moragan, 1994) It implies that the teacher should give examples from cultures in the learning and words from their mother tongue should also be used while dealing with semantics.

The teacher should take the help of folk tales and jokes to make the class interesting and culturally cohesive which will bridge the gap of cultural alienation

III. Conclusion:

Teaching English to multicultural and multilingual students is a big challenge. A new approach can address the problems faced in the classrooms. The theories of second language acquisition (SLA) are not complete in all respect to help the teachers of such class. As the process of language acquisition of a language is unique in every child and no single SLA theory fully explains the process of language learning in a child. Every teacher has to revise his method of teaching by making various adjustments and modifications to suit the needs of each learner. He should study every aspect of child's development both physical as well as intellectual. The teacher is expected not only to examine the child but also his environment, his social surrounding both at home and school, in the past as well as present.

The tribal students of Kalahandi are disadvantaged learners who should be given special care and attention for their improvement in English as well as life style. Efforts should be made at all levels for proper learning of English language which will change the future generation of the tribal people. The paper concludes with the appropriate remark of Vivian Cook (2001):

“A second language affects people's careers and possible futures, their lives and their very identities.”

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