



SHIFTING FOCUS FROM SUBJECT TO LANGUAGE: A NEED FOR TRIBAL STUDENTS OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

English has been a challenging subject for the EFL classrooms. The difficulties are paramount with students and teachers of rural background. Teaching English to tribal students is even tougher. Learners of tribal area mostly study it as a subject; only to pass the exams and step to next higher classes or to get jobs. They never feel it as a language and a life skill that they need for everyday usage. Had English not been a compulsory subject they could not have studied it. Neither their socio-cultural background lays emphasis on learning this language, nor are they encouraged to learn it as an essential tool for discourse. As a result, they gradually distance themselves from learning English. They develop a fear for it and thus they can't prosper.

To bridge the gap and to have a desired teaching-learning outcome students' interest is the foremost factor. Their interest can be borne from proper counselling and motivation, mitigating socio-cultural alienation, incorporating a literature focused syllabus and using culture specific teaching-learning strategies. Taking care of these aspects will lead to creating speech situations for the learners and encourage them to use English in real life communication. And in a way classroom will transform into a site for enhancing their language proficiency. Thus, shifting their focus from treating English just as a subject to an essential language calls for attention and research.

Keywords: Shifting focus, motivation, socio-cultural alienation, culture specific strategies

Introduction

English has its unique importance in today's world. It is one of the major languages used for communication. Of all the languages in the world today English appears to be the most fascinating and challenging language. The very fascination comes from its need, its association to power, status, personality and global phenomenon and the challenging aspect is promulgated by the very act of teaching and learning it. However, in both the cases interest plays a key role. It has been found that despite of adopting many methods and approaches, implementing numerous strategies and putting to force so many policies till the date, English proficiency of the learners is not achieved. Learners of rural and tribal areas are still far away from writing a correct sentence in English, introducing themselves and sharing their experiences with others in English. Now the question is, why this happens? Who is to be held responsible for such fate?

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Gaining interest and the sustenance of it will help to improve the situation. When interest is generated in the learners, the objectives of English education in India will be achieved. To build such interest, a shifting focus from treating English as a subject to learning English as a language is necessary. When I say shifting focus, I don't mean to undermine and dismantle the acceptance of English as a subject. It is and it needs to be. But we should look beyond this boundary which is rather psychological. We can view it as a subject and at the same time it can be seen as a language with potentiality to transform life and career. Studying English as a subject will lead us to exam halls or interview panels but it won't certainly come to help us in our daily life. When it is considered more as a language, an essential tool for everyday communication and a life skill, it is learnt with heart and emotion. This kind of learning is profuse with interest and building proficiency. Thus, some amount of attention should be shifted to its language capacity.

This paper critically analyzes why tribal learners study English just as a subject but not as a language. It also discusses how they should take interest to learn it as a language and meet their language proficiency.

Why as a subject, not as a language?

- Tribal students never understand the significance of English as a language as they never use it in day to day life. 'From their initial stage they never studied it as a language to be used in practical and professional life; they studied it as a subject having no actual use in life. This has damaged the very aim of introducing English language' (Gahane, 2017).
- Socio-cultural and economic backgrounds never encourage them to learn it. Their socio-economic background, parental education and learning conditions affect their English learning. They have grown up in tribal language speaking environment and have less exposure to English. Intrinsically, they may feel urge to learn English, but there is very little support to their efforts from their parents who are predominantly agrarian, semi-urban labourers and daily wage workers. Their parents are illiterate and hence the students' performance lacks parental supervision and guidance which is very necessary at the juncture of their education (Katore, 2017). The cultural background of students can impede learning process (Palfreyman and Smith, 2003). The interference phenomenon of culture affects the students in areas of grammar, phonology, semantics, and spellings. Again, cases of concord incongruity abound in students' oral speech and writing (Anyanwu, 2016).
- English has been a compulsory subject in educational provision. So, for the tribal students the felt need is to pass or secure marks. And here they stay. They never see the potentiality of English beyond a subject. Had English not been a compulsory subject they could not have studied it. The moment they hear something in English, they bury their faces down. As a result of this, a teacher who is supposed to teach English to them finds it difficult or at times impossible.
- Teachers rarely create speech situations and encourage them to use English as a tool of expression. They are rather occupied with covering the syllabus and the learning outcomes in terms of marks. Some don't even pay attention to the process of learning. It is often observed that the teacher shows the tricks of passing the exam and does not bother whether the students have learnt English at the end of the term/year or not. Such practice on the teachers' and the students' path create lack of interest in tribal students and demotivate them from the learning of English at a very early stage in life, which by the course of time becomes one of the major problems of lack of communication skills.
- Lack of exposure is of another concern. Tribal students never get the opportunity to speak in English either in school or at home. The teachers in schools teach English by using one-way lecture method, by creating a feeling of fear regarding this language as a difficult one, and by explaining things in state



language in English class. The students do not get the opportunity to speak in English even at home as nobody at home is educated enough to understand the language. They also don't come out of their place to transact in English with others. This creates a great hindrance for the tribal students in learning the language.

How should they take interest to learn English as a language?

- Tribal students' realization of English language as an indispensable part of their life is important. They must have interest in learning it. Counselling should be done as to remove their fear for English.
- Socio-cultural background can facilitate language learning (Nasri et al., 2015). Socio-cultural background of the tribal students should encourage them to learn English and use it. Language is not culture-free nor is its usage. So, society and culture of tribal students should create space for linguistic exchange of English. As a result, systems of ideas and beliefs can be shared by members of their community and transmitted through English (Bentahila and Davies, 1989).
- Most of our examination systems are the traditional methods to write for many pages in the examination paper. This has made our students the dictators and not the true learners. It is required to adopt the new examination system to attain the real aim of teaching English to tribal students. Besides, a writing focus of exams it should assess their ability to use English in context. The new system should include oral examination, theory examination, practical, seminars, presentations and group discussions etc. as a result, students can realize the significance of English as a language. Their linguistic competency will be put to test. Once they prepare for it, they will automatically have interest to hone their language skills.
- Teacher's role in the shifting focus is paramount. First of all, the teacher should have a rapport with the students. Tribal students have extreme fear for English. If the teacher doesn't build a healthy atmosphere, then teaching and learning English won't be possible. Secondly, English teachers in tribal areas should develop a socio-cultural sensitivity in order to understand the tribal students and their problems. The teacher has to motivate the students to learn English and encourage them to use it during and after classroom interaction. The teacher should also create day to day speech situations for the learners and help them use English without the fear of mistakes. The teacher should take a recourse to multilingual/multicultural creativity. S/he can digitize the English language instruction. Computers can be used in classrooms for instruction in composition, literature, decoding, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, usage, punctuation, capitalization, brainstorming, planning, reasoning, outlining, reference use, study skills, rhetoric, handwriting, drama, and virtually every other area of language art. The teacher can use the culture specific activities in language classroom to motivate the tribal students. As per the needs of the learners the teacher has to adopt the teaching methods.
- 'Extra classes and extra efforts put forth by the teachers will solve the purpose to some extent. The studies show that tribal students admitting that they will be able to do better if any extra classes are taken for them. Hence it is recommended that extra classes should be taken by the teachers in order to put forth some extra efforts for the tribal students. This will lead to more interaction between the teachers and the students. Students will be able to communicate their difficulties better in this manner. If the teachers show any interest in teaching these students with special needs, the students will automatically reciprocate the interest. This will help them gain confidence and do better in the academic aspects of their life' (Behera, 2015).

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- The syllabi meant for teaching English is generally literature oriented. The students' needs are not well documented, not taken into consideration when syllabus is prepared, especially in regard to tribal students. It is full of traditional grammar, language and literary items. It is high time to rethink on the existing English language syllabus. The design in curriculum should be designed in a more practical way so that we should know how to use English language in our daily life. If possible, the syllabus to include indigenous lit for building interest in the tribal learners. When they study indigenous literature, they can relate to their culture, and life and can understand the speech situations properly. They can easily understand the language functions and take interest in using English in life-like situations.
- Special Training of the teacher is a must. Most of the teachers teaching English in tribal areas are not from any tribal background. So, they don't have knowledge about students' socio-cultural background, their needs and their problems. The trainings with a focus on tribal life and education will certainly help creating a conducive teaching-learning atmosphere. Teachers' training should be modelled to address the slow learners and learners of special need. It should also focus English communication skills and language proficiency development of the teachers. Only such trained teachers can do justice to their profession and to the tribal learners.
- Establishing language laboratory is also the need of the hour. It is only in the language lab the use of English in context can be ensured. Tribal students require more and more exposure to English. They also need lots of speech situations to use English. Regular classroom can't aptly meet their needs. Besides, language labs confirm audio visual facility which is essentially necessary for tribal students. They need to listen to English, observe the speech context. And gradually can gather confidence to speak English at various situations.

Some degree and diploma colleges do have language labs. But these are almost lying defunct. Because teachers are not provided any specific training regarding its use. There is also no provision of English practical classes in the syllabus and time tables. Now under this circumstance all laboratories need to be forced to work. Specially for tribal students, exposure to English language is a dire need at this point of time. So, at both school and college level language labs need to be established and put to use in order to encourage the tribal students. Language labs help them bridge the linguistic gap and improve their proficiency in a desired way.

Conclusion

Taking care of the aforesaid aspects is the need of the hour in consonance to tribal students. This will bridge the gap between the expected language proficiency and the actual language learning of the students. Tribal students' acceptance of English as a language and a medium of expression will lead to have a desired teaching-learning outcome. They will thus evolve with interest and passion for learning English and using in daily life. And it will be a burden free learning. Their interest will be borne from proper counselling and motivation, mitigating socio-cultural alienation, incorporating indigenous literature focused syllabus and using culture specific teaching-learning strategies. Taking care of these aspects will lead to creating speech situations for the learners and encourage them to use English in real life communication. And in a way classroom will transform into a site for enhancing their language proficiency. Thus, shifting their focus from treating English just as a subject to an essential language calls for attention and further research.

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