

The Predicament of English Teachers and the Problem of Teaching English in Tribal Regions

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The emergence of globalization as a predominant phenomenon of the last century subjected the contemporary society to multi-dimensional changes that cast its effect on almost every aspect of our life. It opened the floodgates of opportunities, especially for the skilled lots in all spheres resulting into the mass inter-continental migration that turned the whole world into a level playing field where one could redefine one's identity transcending all innate parochial constraints. The seed of materialism sown at the outset of industrialization in the past got a booster dose in the form of globalization that brought unexpected fortunes to many, but on the seamy side, it inculcated exorbitant individualism and consumerism relegating the human elements, the soul of our existence, to the core. Its deadly effect is acutely realized in a country like India where the fate of a sizeable population of tribal community largely depends on the sense of sacrifice and generosity of the enlightened folk who are entrusted to serve these marginalized lots in different capacities. It becomes evident when English language learning and teaching scenario of a tribal region is thoroughly examined. This paper attempts to analyze existing socio-cultural, economic and linguistic milieu of such regions and their overall effect on English language learning and teaching. It further deals with the psychology and attitude of the learners and teachers belonging to such regions and explores the possibility of improving the existing scene.

The teachers and the learners of English of tribal regions are faced with much different socio-cultural, economic and linguistic situations compared to the same folk of urban areas. These differences exercise profound influence on overall teaching and learning processes.

These learners encounter a variety of problems emanating from socio-cultural, educational and economic situations they are placed in. They are underprivileged in many respects. Tribal societies, by and large, are cut off from the mainstream of national development, and so, the fruits of economic prosperity still elude them. It is relevant to mention that poverty creates a vicious circle and these learners are the worst victims of it. Poverty leads to their backwardness in almost every walk of life that includes the potential of learning English as well. The poor nutritional content of their food mars the required mental and physical growth. Because of their cultural and geographic 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. The distinct cultural features of the social set up in which these learners grow, develop among them the feeling of alienation towards English as they feel it to be language of an exclusive elite class. Under this impression they develop a complex that they can not learn this language due to its complexity. Though on the other hand, when such learners are guided properly, the feeling of English being the language of masters becomes a strong source of motivation also as they think it as a means of upward social mobility (Verma & Krishnamurthy, 1989). Their overall backwardness results into the lack of instrumental motivation (careerist considerations), and a deep sense of possession of native culture impedes their integrative motivation (desire to know other culture) for learning the English language. Moreover, no infrastructural facilities, modern devices, etc. are provided to them either in the classroom or at home that may help in motivating them. Most of the parents of such learners are illiterate and hence they do not get required parental care that plays a very vital role in learning in the initial stages of life. Multilingualism that is a ground reality for these learners as they are exposed to many languages- a tribal language, a link language, a national language, a foreign language, etc. simultaneously, contributes further in compounding the problems that come in the way of learning English. For instance, English language learners of a tribal community of Jharkhand use a tribal language that is their mother tongue, a link language used to interact with non-tribal people living in vicinity, a national language that is Hindi, and a foreign language that is English (In the context of tribal societies, it is reasonable to consider English as a foreign language). This is more or less the condition of Indian tribal communities in general. Under these circumstances a tribal learner starts learning English.

All of these situations are quite unfavourable for learning English. These learners exhibit following characteristics during the learning as it has been observed in a survey conducted on the English language learners of Simdega district of Jharkhand.

- i. They show poor motivation towards learning of English
- ii. A considerably low cognitive ability is reported among them.
- iii. The feeling of cultural alienation is found among them in learning English.
- iv. They have a low degree of self-esteem that has a considerable bearing on learning of English. A high degree of classroom anxiety prevails among these learners.

Several researches have been conducted in the field of language learning taking into account all the factors mentioned above. All of these have proved the adverse effects of these characteristics which stand as major stumbling blocks in the learning of English. To substantiate, MacIntyre and Gardiner conducted a research in 1991, and came out with- 'Language anxiety is experienced by learners of

both foreign and second language, and poses potential problems because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language'. Likewise, the ill-effects of low level of motivation, cognition and self-esteem on learning a language have been proved by many scholars.

Amidst these circumstances, an English teacher encounters several odds at various levels in teaching English to the tribal learners. In these unfavourable situations, a teacher is assigned the task of teaching English through the syllabus meant commonly for all the learners irrespective of their socio-cultural background. Baca and Cervantes undertook a research work in 1998 to review the effect of uniform application of teaching materials on all kinds of learners. They observed- 'Using standardized instruments to assess the eligibility and classification of culturally and linguistically diverse students for special education services has been found to be biased'. The implication is that the students from suburbs who have distinct socio-cultural background must not be subjected to the same set of teaching tools which are framed for their urban counterparts. Here comes the question of loyalty of a teacher to his profession. Most of the teachers surrender in these adverse conditions and do not take interest in teaching. They perform the routine work without thinking for the learner's progress. These unfortunate learners are provided with only one resource that is their teacher, and this teacher also starts escaping. For this escapist attitude of the teacher several factors are responsible that may be enumerated as follows.

- i. An English teacher feels demoralized to serve in a tribal region. They feel themselves to be underprivileged after serving the tribal learners. This feeling is partly generated among these teachers by the fellow teachers serving in urban areas.
- ii. Serving in tribal regions doesn't yield any financial benefit, such as additional allowances by the government. It works like a great demotivating factor on the part of the teachers.
- iii. In modern age everyone wants to lead a very luxurious and comfortable life which the teachers of tribal regions do not get as there is no electricity and many other facilities we look for. Consequently teachers prefer to live in urban places that promotes absenteeism among them. 'The shortage of special education teachers and general education teachers with training in special education is very critical in rural areas' (Wrestling & Whitten, 1996).
- iv. Many facilities which are required badly by teachers to keep themselves up-to-date such as internet, journals, recent books on new methods of teaching etc., are not easily accessible for the teachers serving in these regions and hence their interest in teaching is considerably reduced.
- v. Teachers lack in devotion to their noble profession of teaching as their salary hardly gets affected by the result they produce.

As it is commonly seen, in modern age, the sole driving motivational force is financial benefit which has been powerfully ignited by the wave of globalization. It would not be out of context to mention here that in present circumstances, the amount of salary matters more than the nature of a profession, and this attitude has adversely affected the teaching profession. Its ill-effects are realized on these tribal learners whose fate depends on these teachers.

- vi. Some teachers belong to completely different socio-cultural and linguistic background who face difficulty in adjusting themselves in the tribal set-up, and it eats upon their teachability and becomes equally taxing on learnability.

In the light of these observations regarding the existing socio-cultural and linguistic situation, and the attitude of teachers and learners of these regions, we have to look forward for the possible measure to improve English language teaching and learning scenario.

In the task of teaching English to these tribal learners, the role of a teacher is most crucial because it is only the teacher in terms of resource through whom this dismal scene can be changed. First of all the teachers must develop an infelt affinity for the teaching profession. They must think that teaching is the noblest profession as a teacher works in an atmosphere of idealism dealing with soul and heart and lofty ideals that sustain humanity. There is no work as such which serves the society so directly and fundamentally as teaching. It is the best profession of a state because it creates and moulds the nation's citizenship. It is in a true sense the very foundation and the mainstay of national life. Embracing these lofty ideals of teaching, a teacher must show a high degree of devotion and dedication to the teaching profession. Education, in a true sense, helps us counter the temptations of life, and so, a teacher must never be guided by the monetary considerations as mentioned above rather the sense of serving the most unprivileged tribes must be his guiding spirit. A teacher catering to the needs of the most marginalized tribes must derive satisfaction from the fact that his service is most valuable in the sense that he is doing the best for the worst. The teachers must show a high degree of concern for the dismal conditions of English language learning and teaching among the tribal learners and take it as a challenge. Nurturing such an attitude towards this profession on one hand, and consequently, a sympathetic gesture towards the miserable condition of the tribal learners on the other hand, must be the first step taken by such teachers in the direction of changing the existing scenario.

Secondly, teachers must try to analyze all the socio-cultural and linguistic aspects that play an important role in learning and teaching of English language, and in its light, they must come out with an innovative technique of teaching. A very challenging problem for the

teachers and learners is syllabus that shows cosmopolitan bias. It means that the syllabus is framed keeping in view the needs of learners belonging to middle-upper class that can be evidenced by its content. In such a situation, the responsibility of making it interesting depends on the teachers who can mould its contents so as to suit the needs of these learners without bringing any rudimentary change in the proposed syllabus. The main point is that this syllabus must be dealt with in such a way that learners may not feel culturally and emotionally alienated which generally happens in English teaching class-rooms. Herein lies the competence of the teachers who have at least freedom of the style of teaching that gives them ample scope for experimentation.

Thirdly, the teachers must try to acquaint themselves with the cultures of the learners if they happen to be outsiders as without knowledge of native culture of the learners that includes their mother tongue as well, it is difficult to make the process of learning and teaching effective for them. Unless the learners feel some sort of identification with teachers at emotional level, the condition continues to be unfriendly for learning. Therefore, the teachers must behave in such a way that their exposition may bear the required identification so as to get the desired result.

It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures' (Byram & Morgan, 1994). That is to say, the teachers must give examples from the culture of the learners and the words of their mother tongue should also be referred while dealing with semantics. The teachers may take help of folk tales, jokes, etc. of such regions to make the class interesting and culturally cohesive. It will bridge the gap of cultural alienation and increase the interest of the learners in learning.

Fourthly, the teachers must motivate such learners by making them aware of the results of instrumental and integrative motivations. These learners do not have the idea of world outside their surrounding. They are mostly unaware of the advantages which they may have after learning English in shaping their career. They must be taught English as an eye-opener. The feeling of learning English for upward social mobility must be tapped properly among them. Through the teaching of English a teacher must try to instill in such learners, the seed of inquisitiveness so that they may learn more and more about the world that will in turn generate interest spontaneously for learning English. It will be a step towards teaching English through general knowledge and vice-versa. It will certainly have a very positive effect on these learners. It is generally seen that English syllabus doesn't contain the items of motivational aspects and a teacher who is not conscious enough fails to deal with it among such learners. Actually the learners of privileged classes do not require

such contents in syllabus as they are briefed about the relevance of English in modern world by their parents and surrounding itself, whereas the tribal learners fail to know it due to their poor upbringing and so this responsibility lies on the shoulder of the teachers.

Fifthly, understanding that multilingualism is a ground reality of these tribal societies, a teacher must develop the style of teaching in such a way that this multilingualism may be beneficial for them. The use of the mother tongue must be encouraged to counter the odds faced at various levels of teaching. In the light of above made observations certain tips for teachers are enumerated here which may contribute in making the teaching of English among such learners effective.

- i. Take such learners into confidence and try to know their problems in learning English from their point of view.
- ii. Be generous in giving them feedback. Appreciate their efforts in answering the questions. Move close and pat to encourage them to learn. They badly need emotional support. It will have multidimensional effect on their learnability.
- iii. Allow them to answer in a word or a group of words. Do not insist on full sentences. Ask them easy questions first to encourage them for interaction and building confidence. Ask them questions which can be answered in yes or no.
- iv. Allow them to answer in their mother tongue if they can't answer in English.
- v. Do not expose their errors and advise them in soft words to correct it.
- vi. In the initial phases of learning, try to make the classrooms tension-free for such learners so that their natural self may not be stifled.
- vii. Make the class-room so learner friendly that the psychological barrier in the interactions between the teacher and the learner may be blotted out. It will reduce their anxiety level, the feeling of cultural alienation and increase self-confidence and interest in learning.

Price (1991) aptly remarks- 'The role of a teacher is paramount in alleviating anxiety, more vital perhaps than a particular methodology. Teachers who provide a supportive and understanding environment, who employ nonthreatening methods, and who use appealing and relevant topics seem to enhance the foreign language experience'.

In a nutshell, it can be said that all the efforts of teachers must be centralized on evolving the following characteristics in the learners.

- i. They have a high degree of inclination to learning .

- ii. They have the habit of developing their own concept of the items taught.
- iii. They learn from their errors.
- iv. They use knowledge of their mother tongue in mastering a second language.
- v. They are creative and love experimenting with language.

The success of a teacher must be measured in terms of developing these features among his learners. These must be reckoned as the ideal state. But the attainment of this goal is not a cake walk. It requires a lot of expertise on part of the teachers.

In spite of ELT methodology boom pioneered by some psychologists and linguists that chiefly aim at minimizing the role of teachers, it has been widely realized by the researchers that the assumptions underlying these theories may not be universally validated. The different ideological labels such as manager, facilitator, decision maker, etc. evolved by these theorists as an alternative role of a teacher may rightly be viewed as the offshoots of the central place of teacher in the whole learning scenario. It can undeniably be said that teachers must not be other-directed rather they must be inner-directed. The findings of exploratory teaching concept may be very beneficial for the better understanding of teaching-learning scenario of tribal regions. The exploratory teaching focuses on teacher- initiated research, confines itself to localized contexts and presents excellent prospects for an indepth understanding of localized classroom situation which is invaluable for evolving teaching strategies that may best suit the specific needs of the learners. This teaching gives sufficient autonomy to the teachers for whom adopting culturally alien theories and methods appear to be a compulsion. But at the same time it expects the teachers to be more responsive, responsible and innovative. Thus, a resourceful, humane, sensitive and experimental teacher is required to change the dismal English language learning and teaching scenario prevailing in tribal regions. The governments must take steps to boost the morale of such teachers without whose devotion to their noble profession, the goal of teaching English among the marginalized tribal learners may continue to be a pipedream.

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