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Teaching of English to the Mothers of First Generation Learners: A Socio Linguistic and Humanistic Approach of ELT

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Abstract

The importance of parental support with regard to helping the student face educational challenges is a fact that cannot be ignored especially in the case of a first generation learner. They are the first in the family to step into the hallowed halls of a college. They are the offspring of those unfortunate parents who could not avail the opportunity to attend a college but made sure that their children did not suffer in the same way as they saw college education as an escape route out of poverty. In India, like elsewhere in the world they are usually, they come from lower middle class families, are the children of agricultural labourers, bonded labourers, civic sanitation helpers and the like with little or no educational background. The first generation students have a familial backdrop which has academic insufficiency and economic backwardness as its prominent contours.

Keywords

English Language Teaching; Mothers of First Generation Learners; Socio-Linguistic and Humanistic Approach.

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In order to gain a strong foothold in college so that they can fortify their career prospects the first generation learners need academic support from their parents which is often denied due to their parents' lack of education. There are several setbacks that a first generation student may have to suffer if there is a lack of prop from the parents.

The student may tend to score low academically, display characteristics like inferiority complex, lack of initiative, maladjustment and an underdeveloped personality. The first generation learners find themselves on the fringe of two cultures, one of the college and the other at home both of contrasting natures. One is polished and dreamlike while the other is hard hitting harsh reality. Therefore the first generation learners come to form two different identities, one for the college and one for the home.

It has been argued that children from working class homes have a language deficit by comparison with middle class and upper class children on the grounds...that there is less discussion and in general a functionally more restricted use of language, in the typical working class home than in the typical...upper class home. (Lyons 288)

One version of language deficit theory rests upon the distinction drawn by Basil Bernstein between restricted code and elaborated code in his socio-linguistic point of view. According to his theory, the working class or lower middle class child is at a disadvantage at school or college where elaborate code is required to learn objective ideas of any subject. Therefore, when the parents from working class are given some exposure to learn the foreign language, it will have all the positive formative influence upon the first generation learners who enter the college portals.

The first generation learners are sometimes labeled as 'dull', 'backward' or 'slow learners' and as time passes without any significant ascent in their graph of academic achievement they resign themselves to accept this identity tag. The parents of these students are unable to egg them on in a desired manner as they are unable to understand the essence and nuances of college education. Terminology such as credit, elective, extracurricular, major, curriculum, semester, syllabus may be common jargon in the dialogues which the literate parents hold with their children but sound Greek and Latin to the folks of the first generation learner. Here is where English - the ubiquitous, undeclared official language of the world comes to play a major role.

English customarily, for all practical purposes is the predominant language used at collegiate level. The first generation learners who are usually from the regional medium school often rue the fact their parents are not well versed in English which seems to be in today's world an indispensable

ingredient if one needs to taste success. In a study conducted for the first generation learners English stood out as an alien subject for most the parents interviewed. This has many repercussions. For instance these parents were unable to appreciate their children's or their needs for better teaching resources outside college. They dismiss the demands of their children for enrolling into competency enhancing courses and achievement tests like EBEC, IELTS and TOFEL mistaking them to be a waste of hard earned money. In some cases the parents of the students of the first generation learners did not did not comprehend the worth of a college degree and went as far as to encourage their children to drop out so that they could lend a helping hand to bolster the family income.

The first generation learners also bemoan the truth that they are unable to converse with their parents in English like their counterparts who do so with college bred parents who thereby provide a conducive learning atmosphere at home .The parents of the first generation learners also fail to grasp the norms and technicalities of modern collegiate education and hence are incompetent to guide their kids in matters like making a discerning choice of interdisciplinary subjects, ,internship, field work , campus interviews, job placements or selecting a destination for pursuing higher education. Expertise in such matters requires a just a little research which the parents of the first generation learners can manage with some leafing through of some brochures, browsing through the concerned websites and a cursory glance at some academic journals which the parents can do on their own provided they have some rudimentary knowledge of English .

The general notion in Indian families is that it is the father who ventures out to earn the crust leaving the mother at home to cater to the familial needs. So along these lines the mother assume the pivotal role in the lives of her children as she is the who spends the maximal amount of time with her children. The mother is more available and accessible than the father and

especially when it comes to studies her influence is paramount as she is the one who constantly coaxes her child to study at a regular basis goading him / her to perform better to secure a better future.

This act of the mother of being at the side of her child as he/ she studies is in itself of paramount significance and will acquire more meaning when the mother who has never entered the portals of collegiate education, with a little training in communicative English and soft skills becomes a valuable abettor, a veritable aide in her child's education. A fair amount of knowledge in English acquired by the mother would go a long way in augmenting not just her child's intellectual growth but furthermore will make a great difference to the psychological health of the first generation learner.

A few mothers of the first generation learners were chosen for a research project conducted in South India wherein communicative English was taught to them. Most them had completed basic middle school education , were housewives and had an ardent desire to speak and read English well in order to enhance the quality of the lives of their children as well as their own. The mothers were well aware of the pervasive supremacy of English , its monopoly on all spheres of life and how it wielded the key to successful development of their children in this globalised era .

Numerous activities encompassing a wide range of language skills were conducted for the mothers of the first generation learners to give them the 'feel' of the foreign language in order to help them get familiar with it. Knowledge of basic grammar was imparted to the mothers of first generation learners with the help of educational CDs thereby ensuring computer-assisted learning. The mothers of first generation learners were also exposed to a thorough training in verbalizing the language in order to realize its communicative functions. They learnt to ask questions, make requests, express gratitude, get things done and so on, as adequate practice was given to them in mouthing dialogues emulating real life situations, where command over English might be indispensable.

These make-believe situations gave them an opportunity to augment not only their conversational skills but also boosted their resourcefulness in vocabulary as they tried to fit in the right word at the right place. Reading aloud from storybooks was encouraged as it gave them a chance to articulate the words, instill the expressions and acted as means of language acquisition. Reading aloud helped the mothers of first generation learners to perfect their pronunciation, cement the words learnt into their memory and internalize the grammar naturally. Books were lent to enable the students to keep in touch with the language during leisure hours at home after they finished their chores. The mothers of first generation learners were encouraged to read English newspapers and magazines to polish their vocabulary and hone their sentence making skills. The ladies were goaded on to watch English channels on the television like National Geographic, Travel and Living, NDTV, Times Now and History to get acquainted with the stream of sounds in connected speech and the accent, tones and intonation therein.

At the end of the course the mothers felt that they could comprehend and respond to questions make queries, hold telephonic talks and general conversation, all in English, with a greater agility .They realized that the new found mastery over the language would help them to communicate better with their children at home who invariably study in colleges where invariably English is the medium of instruction and perhaps even lend a helping hand to them in their daily studies. This transformation “...from ‘covert- prestige’ to ‘overt-prestige’, that is, the generally recognized ‘better’ or positively valued ways of speaking in social communities (Yule 240)” in the case of the parents has a tremendous impact on their children.

Most software programs and good books are penned in English. Mothers of first generation students seeking to widen their own as well as their children’s computer and general knowledge found the ability to read and understand the English language extremely valuable. Some of them were even

able to assist their kids in the projects and assignments which were the staple exercise in collegiate education. Movies broaden the world of entertainment. Major Hollywood movies have dialogues in English. The plot of these movies is easier to follow if the person watching these movies understands English. The mothers could now follow the English flicks and serials along with their children and provide the much-needed parental guidance required during TV viewing.

Learning to speak English has helped many of the mothers of the first generation learners to come out the cocoon of their homes and make their dreams of finding a good job come true. The knowledge of communicative English could help them to land up with jobs that have functional knowledge as its requisites like that of an office assistant, a receptionist, a typist and the like. They feel that they could now recommence their studies and by pursuing appropriate courses to become eligible candidates for apt jobs that could help improve their standard of living. These mothers of first generation learners who were once dependant on the income of their husband were now in a position to supplement their family income thanks to the leeway they had gained through a better knowledge of English. And this extra income what they earn can stave off pressure from the first generation students to drop out of their studies mid way to support the family. The mothers with their new found mastery over the language could now grasp the pressures faced by their children at college and empathize with them. Those technical terms employed in collegiate parlance like credit, elective and the rest which were up till now unfamiliar to them now begin to make sense to these mothers. Teaching of English to mothers of first generation learners served as a focal force in helping the ladies in not just helping the ladies to come out of their four walls but also enabled them to help their children to cope with global challenges with the help of their recently acquired dexterity in English. Learning to speak English has broadened their learning and employment opportunities, given them the confidence to meet new

people and to take a trip to untraveled places without being dependent on anyone. Knowledge of English has certainly helped the mothers and their children discover a world of information and have opened up new vistas of opportunity, which were hitherto unknown to them. Now facing a world where English dominates almost every sphere no longer perplexes or intimidates these ladies or their children but instead they look forward to confront it with optimism and poise.

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