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English Language Hardships of the Urban Vernacular in India

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Abstract

Millions of people in India view proficiency in English language as a survival kit to achieve upward social and economic mobility, creating pressure for many to start learning the language right from schooling. However, the ground realities tell a different story as there have been many problems with the English language learning process in vernacular-medium schools¹ of India. Not many people are aware of the hardships faced by the vernacular-medium students studying in Indian universities and other institutes of higher education. And not many people are aware of the agony of the young job seekers who had their schooling in Indian languages and could not acquire English well. This paper reviews the evidence of English language hardships faced by vernacular-medium students in India.

¹ A school where all subjects are taught in the local, regional, or first language of the students, rather than in the English language

Keywords

Vernacular-medium; English language; Teaching-Learning; Problems.

1. Introduction

Vernacular-medium teachers in India teach English only as a language in school. They generally follow bilingual approach and summarise everything in the mother tongue of the students on the pretext of making them understand. Generally in the vernacular-medium classrooms, the teachers rarely read out the lessons and rarely speak in English with the students. They compel the students to practice rote learning, and dictate brief summaries of the English lessons, with the sole purpose to make the students pass their examinations (Francis 45). This denies the students every opportunity for listening to English language even with those insufficient hours allotted to the English subject. Also, in spite of exercises in various English language skills, like spelling, grammar, composition and comprehension, the students are not exposed to skill-based communicative language study. Thus, teaching of communicative English is almost non-existent; and, as a consequence, the students do not learn, practice and develop the communicative skills of English language in general, listening and speaking skills in specific. In a reasonably competitive environment, with swift paced technological advancements, the students who are taught English in an unskilled method deal with social problems like unemployment, and personal issues such as reduced self-confidence and increased inferiority complex. These circumstances could not only impair the individual lives of these students but in addition could constrain the overall development of the country (Francis 46).

2. Statement of the problem

Very few vernacular-medium schools give particular emphasis on developing the communication and soft skills of their students. Typically,

learning English in vernacular schools implies rote learning of grammar rules and memorizing the textbook material without actually understanding, which practically never aides them in developing their communicative proficiency. The students from the vernacular-medium tend not to get sufficient time and exposure to learn communicative skills (Rani and Jayachandran 424). Without doubt there is a compulsion and responsibility on the teachers to complete the syllabus within the stipulated time and to show good results. The teaching is carried out simply to engage the students' memory rather than empowering them to improve the English communication skills. The long-established and outdated way of teaching ends up being in practice in vernacular-medium schools of India. The English teachers are not trained effectively to satisfy the specific language needs of ESL learners. Innovative teaching practices remain at its infancy. Although at times, it is observed that a vernacular student can pass the English exams without possessing practical command over the language. However, teaching isolated grammatical material without active engagement in communicative practice proves futile (Rani and Jayachandran 426).

3. English language difficulties of vernacular-medium students

3.1 Lack of communicative context

Patil and Sultana (9-12) stated that in the vernacular-medium classrooms, "English language is treated as a dissectible commodity. The four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are ignored and taught through writing skills like, essays, figures of speech, report writing, question answers etc. Amalgamation of the basic listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills for use in daily routine is completely missed out". Moreover it is to be observed that students usually do not speak the English language or listen to it on day-to-day basis. Speaking the language is not at all mandatory in vernacular-medium schools. This particularly affects the English communication skills of vernacular students (Mohapatra and

Satpathy 22). Similarly, Sasidharan studied the English Language needs of 770 students from 20 Engineering colleges in the Orissa state of India and identified that students from vernacular-medium school background hesitate to communicate in English fearing mispronunciation resulting from mother tongue influence and inadequate practice in speaking English. Moreover, because in schools they had minimal spoken English practice. In terms of language use, most of the learners of English in vernacular-medium schools use their mother tongue at home, in neighbourhood, and with peer groups at school (Chauhan 156).

The universal law of languages suggests that language proficiencies can be accomplished simply by means of sufficient exposure and consistent conversational exercise in the language concerned. The students of vernacular-medium have far less opportunity for continuous exposure to English language. Due to the lack of adequate language learning foundation, they lack correct grammatical skills and appropriate language expressions (Jayakar and Tejaswani 14). Although spoken English is quite possible through minimal vocabulary as well, a majority of these students lack the basic vocabulary knowledge essential for spoken communication. In actuality, many of them also find spelling words quite challenging. Then again, teaching of English in India remains to a great extent examination-oriented only. Students are taught English as a subject like geography, history, biology etc. and not as a language whatsoever. Apart from that, no attention is given towards making the students interact in English. Even today, most of the students understand the value of English language when they have to confront difficulties in getting suitable employment (Gupta 1).

3.2 Outdated and ineffective learning practices

Mohapatra and Satpathy (25) observed that in vernacular-medium urban schools, English is more or less regarded as a foreign language, and proficiency in the language exists at a literal rather than at inferential level, and where

significant communication in English is rare. Many teachers in vernacular-medium schools themselves possess low levels of proficiency in English and they too function at the literal level. Even while they are expected to teach in English, they usually make use of translation and hand out summaries in English which the students rote-learn to pass examinations. Students typically make use of translating English into their mother tongue or the first language, whichever they determine convenient and then reinterpret their thoughts into English, thus resulting in considerable misinterpretation. Vernacular students are therefore unable to clearly express their thoughts in both written and spoken forms; which means lack of potential to communicate effectively (Mohapatra and Satpathy 22). When students from this kind of an environment enter higher education, they are clearly disadvantaged and often find it difficult to adjust to the discourse-based environment in the universities and institutes of higher education (Mohapatra and Satpathy 23).

3.3 Lack of higher education courses in vernacular-medium

It is a bitter reality that teaching of English in India continues to be to a great extent, examination-oriented only. As a result, students from vernacular-medium schools suffer from a syndrome that does not enable them to succeed in higher education courses. They develop an inferiority complex that does not allow them to practice their talent in the process of learning English language (Gupta 1). According to a survey, in India, around 75% of the students studying at the university level come from regional language medium schools (Gupta 2). But unfortunately, hardly any University is providing them higher Education courses in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or any other regional language. After passing senior secondary, willingly or unwillingly, these vernacular-medium students have to take admission in English-medium courses of higher education and at that time it is highly challenging for them to learn the language and understand the subjects of that particular course simultaneously. Although it may seem a minor issue, it has become a major

cause of dropout of students from different courses particularly professional courses. Such tragedy does not end here because anyhow if the student with the vernacular-medium schooling background completes higher education, he/she continues to suffer anxiety from job interviews to day-to-day social interactions in the society (Gupta 2).

3.4 Competition with English-medium students

Furthermore, regardless of possessing good understanding of the subject, if a vernacular student is unable to communicate adequately during interviews or is unable to convince the clients in business, he loses invaluable opportunities to succeed in life (Mohapatra and Satpathy 24). In contrast, the people having good communication skills are preferred for jobs and promoted more easily and a lot faster. For that reason, it is crucial for every student, irrespective of coming from vernacular-medium or English-medium school background, to have command over English language, and improve his/her communication skills to overcome difficulties in English language and become confident. The students think that they do not have enough exposure to English language right from their primary education, as well as consider it a mark of weakness. Additionally, they feel inhibited to utilise their learning with others outside the classroom. However, having only textbook based learning and never developing their skills in speaking, these students have minimal or no proficiency in the English language, low confidence level, inhibitions about speaking, mental block that it is impossible for them to speak in English, fear of making mistakes and the fear of being mocked by other students more proficient in the English language (Gupta 1).

3.5 Unemployment

Undoubtedly it is clear that English plays a foremost and official role in the daily lives of very large numbers of people in India and therefore, it remains the obligation of English teachers to develop the English language capabilities of their students (Gupta 3). But vernacular-medium students in India mostly

leave speaking a language that would not be recognised in the job market (Pathan and Shiakh 137). Around 47 million of Indians in the 15-24 age range were unemployed and so looking for work, based on alarming data published in the 2011 Census of India. India's crisis is not just unemployment – but also un-employability of a vast majority of the people of our country who are unable to communicate proficiently in English.

3.6 Low self-esteem and depression

Regardless of studying English as second language for nearly fourteen years (primary to senior secondary), significant number of students are simply lacking in showing satisfactory English language communication skills at undergraduate level. The condition becomes considerably challenging when they require to study and write examinations of main subjects in their particular subject areas in English language. Crucial numbers of intellectual students drop out of college or university, or become distressed and demotivated when they are struggling to comprehend the lessons taught in English in the classroom (Jayakar and Tejaswani 15). The anxiety and pressure to possess level-headed competency and fluency in English language skills at undergraduate level tends to make a great number of students feel depressed and ostracized. These students become stressed and nervous whenever attempting to prove themselves linguistically credible in English to their peers. Many brilliant students from vernacular-medium schools can be found lagging in job interviews and in other contexts of English language communication. For most of the situations which require communicative proficiency, students with English-medium school background are stealing the march over the vernacular-medium students. Because of this, vernacular-medium students are understood to have been depressed and felt marginalized by their own peer group members on several occasions (Jayakar and Tejaswani 15).

Most vernacular-medium students rarely recover from low self-esteem they experience at higher education level. The inferiority complex relates to

their incompetence in English language, resulting in stress about themselves and their identity. Added to this is their inability to participate in day-to-day experiences academically and socially. Due to such mental blocks, they refrain from using English and rarely communicate with their English-medium peers or co-workers, for they believe that they could be stepping into embarrassing scenarios and see their English language incompetency as threats to their self-identity. The distress is together with their intelligence disturbed and confidence eroded, consequently leading to isolation and loneliness (Murugavel 2).

3.7 Transfer of enrolment to English-medium schools

English, as a medium of education, has emerged as a necessity for everyone which also includes first-generation speakers of English. Therefore, English-medium schools are in demand among all economic and social classes. Because of this, the parents, who themselves had no access to English education; now want their children to study in English-medium schools (Sreejana and Brindha 167). Many who cannot even afford private school fees are turning to private English-medium schools in order to acquire the desired level of English knowledge. Vernacular students in India are suffering because of the poor standard of English teaching, which is affecting their chances in higher education, competitive examinations and job opportunities. Due the deprived quality of education in government affiliated vernacular-medium schools, even parents from low economic strata want their children to learn English and hence are shifting their kids from government run vernacular-medium schools to private English-medium schools and enrolment at vernacular schools happens to be declining drastically. But there will be repercussions to this as India's poor manage to scrape together enough money to send their children to more expensive private English-medium schools (Masani 54).

4. Recommendations

In this day and age, it is a lot more important to empower the students with communicative English to meet their future professional challenges (Francis 48). The vernacular-medium learners could be gradually educated on vital skills such as soft skills, core employability skills and communication skills (Rani and Jayachandran 428). Also, the English teachers could be trained adequately by way of pre-service and in-service professional development, within the context and constraints of the school and the students, in order to develop their English teaching competence and cater to the emerging needs of the ESL learners in vernacular-medium schools (Rani and Jayachandran 428). While teaching English, it is crucial for the English teacher to identify the learner's basic linguistic understanding, cultural background and emotional intellect (Jayakar and Tejaswani 17).

Mohapatra and Satpathy (25) suggested that all students should be furnished with the opportunity and learning environment so that they can engage with and participate in the learning English language and develop competence. This may require adjustments to curriculum tasks, teaching materials, classroom organization and management, learning experiences, teaching styles and assessment procedures (Mohapatra and Satpathy 25). To actualise these adjustments, English teachers could utilise new choices of teaching and learning materials (in print and multimedia format) in order to help vernacular learners acquire linguistic skills effectively. English teachers need to adapt innovative resources in addition to enhancing their own proficiency in English (Chauhan 162).

5. Conclusion

India's National Curriculum Framework by National Council of Educational Research and Training raises a very significant issue: Can English language classroom simulate the acquisition of basic spoken language proficiency that a child naturally achieves outside the classroom in its

environment? If so, how is this achievable with vernacular-medium students who lack the language exposure outside the classroom? The lack of an open minded perspective, the apathy of the policy makers, the half-hearted initiatives of the educational administrators and the inability of the grass root level teachers of English are the causes of the malady afflicting English language teaching in India.

The present state of the English language teaching scenario in vernacular-medium schools of India calls for a sound pedagogical practice of teaching suitable for developing the English learning context of the vernacular learner. Spoken English, especially, is a problem, as vernacular students make basic grammatical errors and struggle to speak fluently. Even students who have scored high marks in English in their school exams have a problem with speaking. It unfavourably affects their chances during job placement as they are not able to communicate their ideas effectively in English. Many colleges and universities in India are now setting English language laboratories in order to help their vernacular-medium students learn English, but unless these children are taught better right from their school level, there is sparse possibility for them to develop their language skills effectively.

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