



TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN TAMILNADU- AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

English language teaching in India is a complex and diverse phenomenon in terms of resources for teaching-learning of the language, the teacher, pedagogical practices and the demand for the language. It is an ever-expanding part of almost every system and stage of education in India. Out of 35 states and union territories, 26 have introduced English as a language from class I of which 12.98% are primary schools, 18.25% are upper primary schools and 25.84% are schools at the secondary level (NCERT, 2007). A network of secondary schools numbering more than 1.1 lakh, some 11,000 colleges, universities (numbering 221 apart from 40 odd deemed universities) and other institutions of higher learning and research whose numbers and reach keep growing, offer instructions in and through this language at various levels and under different arrangements. This paper discusses and draws conclusions on the issues and problems in the practice of English language teaching in the four schools chosen for the study in terms of objectives of ELT, curriculum and syllabus, materials and classroom processes in the schools as understood from the analysis of the secondary and the primary data.

Key Words: English, second language, teaching, Tamil nadu etc.

The current study explored the English language education in the state of Tamil Nadu with an emphasis on English language curriculum, syllabus and materials. It also looked at the perceptions of three different stakeholders in the business of education *viz.* learners, teachers and parents. The learners were chosen from four schools, two each from urban and rural areas. The sample consisted of 222 students studying at the secondary level (classes IX and X). Limitation of the Study. This research is based on data collected from four schools selected, two each from rural and urban areas in the state of Tamil Nadu and is exploratory in nature. The processes and practices of assessment and issues and problems associated with this aspect are not considered in this study. Curriculum and syllabus are the major instruments for planning and implementation of any educational programme. They guide the materials developers, practicing teachers and others involved in the process. The curriculum statements and the syllabus in the state of Tamil Nadu do not provide proper guidelines for materials developers and teachers about the objectives of language teaching-learning, the processes (methods and strategies) that may be adopted by the teachers and the assessment procedures. Though the syllabus aimed at following the Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT), it fails to realise it fully as the syllabus only lists the competencies to be taught or achieved. It does not make it clear ‘what a competency is?’, ‘What are the objectives of English language teaching in the competency based syllabus?’ and ‘What are the methods and strategies to be followed for a competency based curriculum?’ This lack of clarity in the curricular statements and syllabus makes it difficult for teachers to deliver the materials effectively.

Competency based curriculum believes in product based language teaching- learning and does not give much scope for processes which expose learners to language and for engagement with language. Lack of knowledge on what competencies are and how a competency could be achieved in the classroom makes the classroom processes mechanical. Each unit of the English language textbooks for classes IX and X makes an attempt to structure the skills, LSRW and the competencies that the syllabus aims to achieve. While the competencies are listed as skill based, occupational and creative competencies, most of the activities follow the Present-Practice-Produce mode (PPP model) in which the learners are often put in a situation to respond as passive recipients of the language input. Learners are expected to give the output in terms of, in most cases, words, phrases or paragraphs in writing, barring a few oral activities or tasks.

Selection of the subject matter and the focus reveals that the themes of the prose texts and poems selected are from cross-curricular contexts, from various genres and registers. The

themes are mostly contemporary. However, the selection of the texts / materials shows that most of them are textbook writer created or contrived to the extent that authenticity is lost, thus depriving the learners of natural language. Teaching-learning activities are structured in such a way that it is assumed by the textbook writers and also expected of the teachers that LSRW should take place in a structured manner. Listening activities take place first and then speaking, before reading and writing. This pattern is followed in each unit. Learners are expected to follow the instructions given by the teacher and to carry out activities as a response to the directions given. Learner taking initiative, supplying information while in groups or pairs is minimal and learners are often not called on to provide ideas and knowledge in an initiative position (Littlejohn, 1998). Most of the activities are individual activities or to be done simultaneously by the whole class as directed by the book. The teacher often has no role to play. This would not help in promoting peer interaction and cooperative learning. The activities are designed as products ignoring the process.

The materials assume that the teachers' role remains that of a good old 'giving' teacher following the textbook instructions carefully. The note to the teacher in the preface only informs the teachers 'what' is there in the textbooks. This would be a disadvantage for both the category of teachers-the novice as well as innovative ones- because the novice teacher may find it difficult to understand the design of the activities, while an innovative teacher would be restricted from moving beyond the textbook. There is a serious attempt to teach the learners the rules of grammar. These are taught like mathematical formulas to be applied immediately in natural contexts. Learners are not given scope to discover the rules of language in contexts and internalize them before using the same in real life situations. Most activities are isolated, single sentence based where the learners are asked to convert from direct to indirect speech, from one degree to another (comparison of adjectives), convert from simple sentence to complex and so on. No attempt is made to teach or test grammar through integrated activities.

The supplementary reading section does not promote the idea of extensive reading. The texts (short, biographical texts) selected are not from authentic sources and even if they are adopted or adapted selections from authentic ones, they are simplified to the extent that the authenticity is lost. The extensive reading texts are used to teach vocabulary, local comprehension and the writing skill. Thus they are like any intensive reading text. The textbooks lack coherence within each unit as well as between units. They present rigidly structured activities from listening' to writing skills along with the inclusion of professional, occupational and creative competencies. The (main) text used in each unit is treated as an isolated text meant

for comprehension and to some extent for vocabulary or study skills; the remaining activities / tasks for realising other competencies. Thus the books as whole as well as the units lack coherence.

The teachers are confused about how to transact the textbook in the classroom; this is evident from the responses to questionnaires, opinionnaire and interviews as well as my own observations. In my discussion with the teachers outside the classroom and school revealed that they are not aware of the pedagogical use of materials. Since there is no understanding about nature of language, language pedagogy and role of materials in language learning, they assume that the textbook is the most important tool and input for language teaching. Thus the textbooks in English for classes IX and X seem to be a manifestation of pedagogically unsound understanding of the philosophy of the syllabus i.e. the competency based syllabus. The materials themselves do not seem to have followed the basic pedagogical tenets of language learning.

In general, the English language classroom is taken as another content subject and ‘any one can teach English’ is an accepted practice as there was no ELT trained teacher or even an English literature graduate teaching English in all the four schools. Teachers assume that children need to learn the ideas or concepts more than the language. There is lack of knowledge of language pedagogy and the recent developments in language pedagogy. The importance of interactions and building on the knowledge of the children is starkly missing. It is surprising to know that none of the teachers have undergone any in-service training in English language teaching during the last decade. There are teachers who have not seen a training or an orientation since they joined the school system as teachers.

Another phenomenon noticed in the teachers of all the four schools is ‘teaching the way I was taught’. Most of the teachers were typical products of structuralist-behaviourist school of thinking on pedagogy. Lack of knowledge of current practices and emerging trends in language pedagogy on the part of the teachers leads to a kind of situation where learners are left to learn the language on their own. The methods followed by teachers merely aim at getting the learners a pass or sometimes good grades. Most of the teachers also believed that their students were from relatively lower economic background and their parents were not able to support them in their studies. They had to depend on themselves or on their teachers. So, the teachers believe, learning of English would be difficult for this category of children as there is no environment at home to learn the language. The irony is that there is no environment in school to learn the language in an interesting manner. Most of the teaching is mechanical and

monotonous. There is no classroom life:

‘...The quality of classroom life is itself the most important matter, both for long-term mental health of humanity (and the mental health of the language teacher), and for the sake of encouraging people to be lifelong learners, rather than people resentful of having to spend years of their lives as ‘captive’ learners, and therefore put off further learning for life.’(Allwright (2005: 14)

The language input the children receive in school from teacher’s lecture or print material is very limited. Krashen (1985) talks of providing comprehensible input to learners for learning a second or foreign language. The comprehensible input has to be slightly above the level of learners so that they get an opportunity to think and engage with the language. Krashen puts it as $i+1$. If the language proficiency of the learner is i we need to provide $i+1$. In case of the classrooms observed and the strategies adopted by teachers, it is assumed by the teachers that learners should be given minimal language input and exposure because they are not proficient in the English language. All the learners, even non-Tamilians, were proficient in Tamil suggesting the powerful impact of the host society. The school education system makes a provision for the study of only two languages only i.e. Tamil / mother tongue and English. Any other language that the child picks up is because of the familial pressure and social context.

Hindi is not an important language and is not a school language. The language policy of the state and also the political movement against Hindi which has its root since independence still prevails as the Dravidian parties (which launched the movement) have been in power since 1969. Tamil Nadu rejected the three language formula opposing the ‘imposition of Hindi’ on the people of Tamil Nadu. Hindi has not been able to make a dent even in informal domains such as cinema. Learners do not prefer to watch Hindi movies because they do not know the language. Another reason for this is the Tamil cinema is very vibrant and a large number of movies are produced every year. Sanskrit is not a language known to them at any level or domain. This is contrary to the trend in other states. In the neighbouring states viz, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Sanskrit is introduced as a third language. Tamilians feel that Tamil is also a classical language with a history as rich and ancient as Sanskrit.

Mother tongue is used with all interlocutors in all the domains viz. Home, school and outside domains. English is evidently not a home language at all, although some children use English with their siblings. Rural female learners claim to use English with all the three interlocutors- father, mother and siblings- in comparison with the other groups. There is not much difference between the rural male and urban male learners in the use of English with all the three members of the family. The other language use is very minimal in the family domains

with all the interlocutors. Mother tongue is least used with teachers suggesting that the schools in a way make it compulsory for learners to speak in English to their teachers. It is the rural schools surprisingly which provide more opportunities for learners to speak in English in the school. In the outside domain as well, the mother tongue is used with all the interlocutors. The percentage of learners using the mother tongue with personnel at the post office, railway station is less than others. English language use is less than mother tongue with all the interlocutors. Use of other language(s) by learners is well below 10 % in all the domains. Teachers do not seem to recognise the multilingual abilities of the learners. This can be seen in the perceptions of teachers about the English language proficiency of learners. The National Curriculum Framework – 2005 which serves as the model curriculum for the country and has been adopted or adapted by several school systems at the national and state level advocates multilingualism as a strategy for learning of all languages and content areas. Teachers need to use the languages of learners in the classroom as a resource for teaching-learning of English. However, the teachers merely translate from English to Tamil.

Learners' perception of English language education, curriculum in school sheds light on the transaction with in the classroom and the demand for the English language in general. Tamil Nadu is undergoing rapid expansion in higher education, particularly technical education and almost all (more than 95%) higher education is in English medium only. This is seen when a majority of learners stress the importance of studying English for upward mobility. Both rural and urban learners perceive English language as an instrument for getting good jobs and to get into higher education. Urban learners feel that English is also vital for migration to developed countries like USA, Canada and Australia.

The learners from both the groups have mixed responses about the methods and strategies adopted by their teachers for teaching of English. Most teachers resort to translation as a method or depend on whole class lectures. There is little room for group work or pair work. Teachers follow the textbooks religiously. In the absence of any guidelines for teachers in the textbook teachers see the rubrics / instructions as guidelines for transacting the materials in the classroom. Almost no teaching aids are used.

It is essential for the syllabus to guide the materials developers, practicing teachers and anyone who implements the curriculum at any level by clearly stating the overarching aims of the subject, stage-wise objectives and skills that need to be fostered so that these can be translated into action in the materials and in the classroom transactions. The syllabus analysed in the present study does not provide any of these. This leads to a state of confusion at every level of

curriculum implementation.

The study has brought out some shocking revelations about the materials for teaching-learning of English as a second language in the Indian context. Lack of understanding about nature of language, how languages are learnt / acquired has resulted in materials which do not provide any support for the teachers to realize the intended objective of language teaching. Contrived and simplified materials have deprived the learners of exposure to authentic language. The tasks and activities also lack context and authenticity. Development of tasks and activities has to be seen from the perspective of the learners. The materials development team could not put together context based materials. Nor was any piloting of materials done before they were finally implemented.

Teachers who are the real implementers of the curriculum are the ones who suffer the most in terms of understanding the materials, proposed methodologies and assessment process. While any school system would be expected to equip its teachers with the subject and pedagogical knowledge as an ongoing exercise in the system, the teachers studied in this research had not seen any professional development activity for more than a decade; some of them had not had orientation or training after their pre-service (i.e. B.Ed.) This adversely impacted their teaching, understanding of the curriculum and the learner. Teachers' need to understand the very purpose of curriculum revision, when and why it happens, and also the new approaches and methodologies the new curriculum proposes. This will enable them to transact the materials and enable learners learn the English language. One major implication of this research is the need for continuous professional development of teachers.

- The study reveals the sad state of affairs of teaching-learning of English in both rural and urban settings. One major reason for this is the lack of professionalism from curriculum development to classroom teaching. There is an urgent need to develop expertise in curriculum and materials development in English language education in the Indian context. The national level curriculum development process adopted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) involves various stake holders in the processes of curriculum and materials development. This has yielded fruit in imaging a vision for curriculum and materials development which has had positive outcomes. The states should also evolve a mechanism for curriculum development based on these principles.
- Materials development is a professional activity. The study indicates the need for

developing expertise in materials development. We need to bring in practicing teachers, creative writers, researchers, linguists, NGOs working with different types of children for this task. Also, there is need for training these people on the new developments taking place in the field of language teaching. Universities and institutions like NCERT may launch short term courses for this purpose. Distance education institutes may also be called upon to offer such courses.

- None of the teachers in the schools had undergone any training during the last decade and most of them had not seen any training since their joining the profession. There is an urgent need to train the teachers on various aspects of English language education. The areas which the training would cover are: Language and learning, nature of language, multilingualism in ELT, teaching-learning of specific skills, pedagogical grammar, and continuous assessment processes. Processes of the training / orientation should be participatory in nature, involving reflections by teachers, demonstration lessons by trainers and participating teachers.
- Teachers need support materials to learn and use in their classroom teaching. Teacher's hand books and manuals which provide insights into language pedagogy and teaching of individual's skills and teacher's edition of the textbook with notes for the teachers will support the teacher to improve the classroom practices. State agencies involved in the curriculum and materials development should bring out such materials to support the teacher.
- Teachers who teach English should have qualifications in English language / literature and should be trained in language pedagogy.

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