

**WHOSE WORLD IS ‘OUR WORLD THROUGH ENGLISH ‘?’
(CULTURAL BARRIERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY
LEARNERS IN A.P)**

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Abstract

The secondary school learners find learning English a problem in itself. It is complicated further if the prescribed text includes content of a culture that is unknown to their level. Mere knowing the meanings of words to comprehend the ‘text ‘ is not enough. The reader should be in a position to assume the explicit and implicit meaning of the given text. It is possible when the reader gets the experience of the meanings of words which are included in their native culture. This paper throws light on how culture influences and the hindrances it causes in the language learning process, with special reference to the series “Our World Through English” specially in light of the recent deletions enforced. The paper ends with suggestions in order to minimize the crippling caused by foreign ‘culture’ to the” language learning process” for learners of English in secondary schools.

It is an acknowledged fact that in our country, the process of English language teaching and the objectives of the learning process along with the methods of language acquisition are in a continuous process of revisions and reforms .The responsibility of observing the revised content and if it meets the expected standards to provide the outcomes envisioned, falls not only on the scholarly expert curriculum designers but also on the teachers who are the facilitators and the trouble shooters in the true sense.

Irrespective of the measures to promote communication skills in English at all levels, the rural and semi-urban school goes in India, mainly from the regional language medium, have not shown the expected skills either in speaking or writing . There can be many areas that need to be scrutinized for this , like lack of properly trained teachers, infrastructure, student teacher ratio etc. The content in the prescribed lessons and the extent to which it comes into the learners’ comfortable level of cultural cognition is an area worth reckoning .

The inseparable link between any culture and its language is universally accepted. A culture is a way of life of a group of people. The symbols, language, behavior, beliefs and values people learn as members of society determine human nature. Different cultural groups think, feel and act differently. Cultural differences manifest themselves in different ways and at differing levels of depth. Symbols represent the most superficial and values the deepest manifestations of culture, with heroes and rituals in between.

Perhaps our most important set of symbols is language. As long as we agree how to interpret these words, a shared language and thus society are possible. Children learn from their culture just as they learn about shaking hands, about gestures, and about the significance of the flag and other symbols. Humans have a capacity for language that no other animal species possess. Our capacity for language in turn helps make our complex culture possible. Language, of course, can be spoken or written.

To what extent does language influence how we think and how we perceive the social and physical worlds? The famous but controversial Sapir – Whorf hypothesis argues that people cannot easily understand concepts and objects unless their language contains words for these items (Whorf, 1956). Language thus influences how we understand the world around us. Culture and language are intertwined and culture cannot be divorced from language and literature. Literary texts often reflect practices, culture, attitudes and beliefs of native speakers of the language, the learner has no option other than assimilating the culture. The ability of the Indian school goer at the secondary level to absorb the foreign cultural implications in an ESL classroom is questionable and the expectation is unreasonable according to the present researcher.

Using literary pieces in EFL/ESL classrooms has become a fundamental element in order to achieve constructive communication in meaningful scenarios. This is practical, as through literature, the learner's sense of involvement is developed and the affective domain of the learner is strengthened. Literature enhances the emotional involvement of the learners and gives them the pleasure of using it more. However the appropriateness of the texts selected for a particular class remains a crucial factor in the success of the teaching approach followed in that particular class. Texts chosen should not be too long, too complex linguistically and not too far removed from the worldly knowledge of the students.

Students need to be able to identify with the experience, the thoughts and situations depicted in the text, in order to make connection to personal or social significance outside the text. Therefore as McRae (1991:126) suggests, a good choice would be any text that encourages or invites interaction with the world of ideas, a text that affirms, confirms and expands the indispensable human capacity to read the world. Texts should also provide good potential for a variety of classroom activities, in order to give students more chance to gain true familiarity with any work as a whole. Most importantly, the texts should have the capacity to engage the interest of the student.

How far does the series 'Our world through English' (classes 6-10), prescribed for the Andhra Pradesh students, show a glimpse of the world, or 'the learners' world' so to say, such that their learning could be facilitated? "Our World through English" Class VI to X have been prepared in accordance with the syllabus for a ten-year course in English as a second language. Units are thematically organized with passages meant for listening and reading. Activities focus on reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and study skills. After completion of the course, the students are expected to attain basic proficiency in language, develop linguistic competence for abstract thought and construct oral as well as written discourses.

The series is an appreciable venture designed to meet the objectives. The topics are designed to bring awareness among the students on different social issues. But, some of the lessons in these texts deal with situations and culture, good in themselves no doubt, but foreign and unimaginable to the young learner. The teachers feel that before learning anything about the foreign culture, a glimpse from our native culture in English would make it a smooth sail both for the teacher and the learner. There are innumerable anecdotes from our surroundings which rouse the learners' interest and retain it, making pair and group activities very learner friendly. In the allotted hours for the lessons, if the teacher has to motivate the learners, help them overcome their dread for English language and at the same time allot a major chunk of the time to acquaint them with a totally unknown culture in order to comprehend the text and do the language activities, it is a myth if anyone claims to have succeeded. Even otherwise, it would be wise to ease the strain of both the teachers and the learners by deleting some lessons which are above the learners' level culturally.

Recently, after a thorough study of the texts and the challenges faced over the last five years, some of the lessons from the texts have been deleted, stating the reasons. The researcher does not intend to question the expert committees' decision in deleting the texts on grounds like 'beyond the learners' cognition level'; 'high vocabulary'; 'too much background knowledge needed'; 'too much ambiguity'; "Not interesting to the learners' etc. What surprises the teachers is the reasons given for the deletion of a poem by Smt. Sarojini Naidu or a short story "The Storeyed House" because they reflect 'Telangana Culture' and "Maharashtra Culture". Beyond doubt, our Indian learner can understand, even at the secondary level, the Telangana or Maratha cultures better than they can the African or American culture.

It is not the country from which the piece of the text is chosen that matters. It is the content, the language and the universality that matter. If the lesson 'The tattered blanket' is accepted instantaneously by the learners, so is the short story 'What can a dollar and eleven cents do'. One of the stories is from Kerala and the other is from abroad. There is some universality like wise, in the topic 'Attitude is Altitude' and no learner stops to question if Nick is from Australia or America. This is 'our world' through English, for the learners can comprehend, analyse and involve themselves in the post-lesson activities with minimum teacher support. The culture projected is close to the learners' real world. The same ease cannot be expected from learners who do not know anything about apartheid, racial discrimination, the 100 year war or the early 19th century socio economic conditions of England. If it is difficult for a child to imagine a 'white donkey' in a fable, is it justified to expect such a learner to understand the former topics, however much the grownups may consider them a part of 'our world'?

Under social issues, it is expected for the learner to know about the problems of child labour, the difficulties in children's homes in India and respond, for that is his world or 'our world' right now. How can a dated episode from the 19th century novel, that too a mere fragment from a big novel, be prescribed? The world of Oliver Twist is not 'our world' now. If Anthony's speech needs a lot of background preparation, so does this piece. When the committee has found it proper to delete Anthony's speech, a longer piece like 'Oliver asks for more' must be considered too tough for the learner for the same reasons.

'OLIVER ASKS FOR MORE', a lesson in Class VIII Text Book, exemplifies how the 'Cultural Barriers' obstruct the meaning making. It is an extract from the eighteenth century literary piece, OLIVER TWIST, in which, the author depicts the socio economic and cultural conditions of that age. Of course, literature is a mirror of the age in which it is written. It consists

of the age old vocabulary which is not in use and the then social conditions that have no relevance to the present.

In brief, the novel, OLIVER TWIST, is a protest against the Poor Law of 1834. The Law allowed the poor to receive public assistance only if they lived and worked in established workhouses. Those who could not support themselves were considered immoral and evil. In the 19th century, the orphan Oliver Twist is sent from the orphanage to a workhouse, where children are mistreated and barely fed. He moves to the house of an undertaker, but after an unfair severe spank, he starts a seven day runaway to London. Workhouses were deliberately made to be as miserable as possible in order to deter the poor from relying on public assistance. The philosophy was that the miserable conditions would prevent able – bodied paupers from being lazy and idle bums. Meals served to workhouse residents were deliberately inadequate, so as to encourage the residents to find work and support themselves.

The environment shown in the lesson is totally new to the children. In a way, it is contrary to the child rights law and prevention of child labour. The culture as well as the vocabulary stand in their way forward. The meaning of the text is beyond their experience or exposure. It is difficult for the student's age to understand the philosophy behind punishing the child for asking some more gruel. The value they encounter in the lesson is quite different from that in their daily lives. Finally, the Text fails miserably in arousing interest in the students and rather stands as a barrier in meaning making. As already mentioned, the teachers are not in a position to explain the historical background of the literary text.

Same is the case with the lesson “A Long Walk to Freedom”, a lesson from class IX. It depicts the picture of racial discrimination i.e. apartheid. In India we have caste and class system. Some People face discrimination against caste and class. The students have this experience and can understand easily. But they don't have the experience of apartheid and feel difficulty in understanding the people's difficulties due to apartheid. So, however noble the message, it fails to impress and enthuse.

“An Icon of Civil Rights”, a lesson from class IX. is the acceptance speech of Martin Luther King, civil rights movement leader, on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace prize in Oslo, Dec 10, 1964. The speech is full of lofty ideals, once again founded on the elimination of racial discrimination. The syllabus designers could think from the learners' side, if not from the teachers' side and question how far they are justified in retaining these lessons from a totally unknown culture and unknown social problems. Instead they might include Netaji's speech which is restricted to the listening passage as a reading text. If a lesson on 'Joan of Arc' is deleted, the gap can be filled by including plays on Indian freedom fighters like Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali etc. Creating awareness about their immediate surroundings, their nation's problems and efforts for improvement would prepare them to face the world better.

Deleting nearly two units from each text, has surely eased the teachers' burden, but has it served the purpose for which the texts were intended initially? Is there no need to include substitute topics to fill the gap and provide awareness on technology, travel and tourism, career options etc? In 2016 Course Book the themes “SOCIAL ISSUES” and “HUMAN RIGHTS” are omitted. The two are very important. Our society has been suffering from many social evils like dowry, un-touchability, poverty, child labour, corruption, woman abuse, molestation etc. So, at any cause to avoid the themes ‘SOCIAL ISSUES’ and ‘HUMAN RIGHTS’ needs reconsideration. Obviously, in the revised format, though some good has happened there is much

more to be done. The Text Book writers should have focused on including various language items (varied discourses) which facilitate Language learning.

So, an empathic approach, an effort to look at the world from the young learners' level of cultural comfort and selecting texts that are age-appropriate while moulding them into confident communicators with awareness on 'their world around them' would go a long way in meeting the expectations of the text-book designers.

Workcited

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