

RECONCEPTUALIZING TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION MAKING: A MODEL OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE TRIBAL LEARNERS AND RELATED ISSUES

Mr. Ranjit Mandal (Gold Medalist)

Faculty, Department of English
DMS, Regional Institute of Education (NCERT),
Bhubaneswar (Odisha)

Abstract

Focusing on some ancillary areas and overlooking the important issues of teaching itself, English language teaching and learning have turned out to be a futile effort in tribal schools in recent time. Though the emphasis on these has a fruitful importance, it skirts the primary focus on teaching itself and learning to teach. This article focuses on the problems of teaching English to the tribal learners in Odisha at school level and suggests certain pedagogical instructions in teacher's training programme that would be effective for the target learners. It concludes with a note of how multilingual approach to teaching English will be a great resource for bridging the gap between home and school, promoting learner's autonomy.

Keywords: socio-cultural issues, decision making, reconstruction of attitude and awareness, multilingual material, teacher training and development.

Introduction

Having been so much focused on so many ancillary areas like research in second language acquisition and learning, methodology and so on, the language teacher education programme and the language teacher education texts exclude the central issue i.e., the teaching itself and how individuals learn to teach and subsequently develop as teachers. Being trained in such an environment, teaching English, for many, is viewed as the translation of what they gain as teacher-in-preparation. Though this general tendency of translating into teaching undoubtedly has some fruitful outcomes, it skirts some valuable factors such as the role of socio-cultural factors, the (re)construction of awareness and attitude, and thereby handicapping the process of teaching English especially when it comes to the context of tribal schools.

This article deals with the teaching of English to the Juang learners at school level and focuses on the following three interlocking ideas: firstly, it denotes the problems of decision making based on the teacher's socio-cultural knowledge, skill, attitude and awareness; secondly, the inclusion of various pedagogical issues and multilingual materials, and finally the strategies

required for teacher training and development for teaching Juang learners.

Background

Juang is a group of tribal people usually found in hill areas of Keonjhar district of Odisha though some migrated to the neighbouring plains of Dhenkanal in the late nineteenth century. They have a firm belief that their tribe emerged from the earth itself in the hills of Keonjhar where the river Baitarani has its origin. Being dissociated from the mainstream, they have their own system of society, culture, rituals, festivals and so on. Starting from the celebration of birth to the cremation of a death including the marriage, they are completely different from others. And most importantly, they have their own language e.i., Juang language which is different from the mainstream Odia language morphologically, syntactically and semantically. In their language, the word 'Juang' means "man emerges from the earth at the same place where the river Baitarani emerged"(kendujhar.nic.in). Though they do not have any written script of this language, yet it has a rich heritage of oral literature (folktales, folksongs etc.).

Many efforts have been put, many programmes have been designed, implemented and many buildings have been erected for bringing the tribal children into the light of education, but unfortunately the sun never rises for them when it comes to the teaching of English. For them, Juang is the mother language, English happens to be the target language which is taught through another language i.e., Odia with linguistic and cultural diversity. And this is what creates problem (or more accurately this problem is created) for them to learn English. Imagine a child of five or six years who even does not know how to peel an orange very well is said to learn a foreign language through another unfamiliar language and culture.

Decision making

The decisions made by the teachers are very much important in such classrooms. But as I have said at the very outset of my paper that most of the language teacher education programme and the texts focus on some ancillary areas, they sometimes fail to enable the teacher to do much with decision making and teacher development. Though some such areas like second language acquisition and methodology have some contribution towards the development knowledge on which language teaching is based, yet these could not be the primary focus for enabling successful teaching. It will be misleading and at the same time inappropriate to think that what we learn about these areas would fully enable us to execute the process of teaching learning successfully.

To address this problem, we need to see language teaching in this context as the reflection of decision making based on the confluence of four following constituents: knowledge, skill, attitude, and awareness.

Knowledge

The knowledge of the following areas is the first and foremost thing which is required for teaching at any context.

- i) What is being taught (subject matter)?
- ii) To whom it is taught (students- their background, learning style, linguistic level)?
- iii) Where is it taught (socio-cultural context)?

Knowledge of all these three areas has very important role to play in teaching language though the last one is always either ignored or neglected. This ignorance or negligence paralyses the first two areas and consequently the process of teaching and learning of English is largely impaired

when it is performed in the tribal schools. The learners of these schools are usually provided with the same materials which are prescribed for the mainstream learners. These books contain some social and cultural values and events which are completely different from theirs. As soon as they join school, they face not only unfamiliar languages but also unfamiliar cultures. This doubles the cognition load one has and sometimes leads to 'cultural shock' which raises their 'affective filter' high. Moreover, the materials which are introduced to them have the same linguistic difficulty level. But there is a wide gap between the mainstream and tribal learners in this case. It so happens because the amount of exposure the Juang learners get in the hill region is very less compared to others. But, when the tribal learners are served with same linguistic level, they fail to cope up with the materials.

Therefore, the teacher has a very crucial role in such setting. It is important for him to have an exclusive knowledge of these areas and plan accordingly to make the process of teaching learning effective.

Skill

Skill, the next constituent is determined by knowledge and refers to what a teacher can do or in other words, "what the teacher has to be able to do" for learners: present material, give clear instruction, correct errors, manage classroom interaction and so on. In the context of teaching Juang learners, a teacher needs to be very much skilled as the learners face some major problems outlined in the previous section and he/she can do the following things to facilitate them in such cases:

- i) adapting materials
- ii) effective pre-teaching
- iii) simplification
- iv) scaffolding
- v) lowering 'effective filter'
- vi) grading exercises
- vii) designing materials.

This list is not exhaustive as many more actions can be added to this list depending upon the context.

Attitude

The first two constituents (knowledge and skill) are frequently used but the other two (attitude and awareness) are occasionally mentioned in language teacher education literature though they are equally effective for teaching and most importantly learning to teach English in any context including the context of Juang.

Attitude can be defined as the stance that a person adopts or adapts towards himself/herself, the teaching activity and the involvement of the learners in the process of learning. On one hand it is an interplay of external actions and perception and on the hand "an internal intrapersonal dynamics, feelings and reaction"(Freeman 32). This attitude is constructed in any teacher. They have their own ways to look into teaching. For example, it is seen in the English classroom of Juang learners that the teachers mostly use Odia language as the medium of teaching. The result is obvious here. Learners affective filter go very high as they face two unfamiliar languages together. It leads them to the state of disarray whether to learn Odia or English. Most surprisingly, they often prefer to shy away from the teacher even if they want to

initiate an interaction because they neither know Odia very well nor English. They refuse to open their mouth in Juang language as they neither see any use their L1 in classroom nor are encouraged for so. It is worth mentioning that the teacher himself perceives these learners inferior to mainstream learners and so is their language and culture. It gradually creates inferior complexity among Juang learners. As they move up, they end up in learning Odia language at the cost of giving up their L1 and lowering down the process of learning English. And the worst consequence of this is that their L1 with rich oral literature is about rest on deathbed.

This kind of problem can only be solved through the reconstruction of teacher's attitude which not only result in effective learning but also saves the life locally used language. Instead of using Odia language, the teachers need to switch over to Juang language and at the same time, learners in such context should be encouraged to use their L1.

Awareness

The fourth constituent is very much important. For the interaction and integration of knowledge, skill what is necessary is the inclusion of awareness which refers to the capacity to understand and "monitor the attention one is giving or has given to something. Thus, it helps a teacher to act on or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware"(Freeman 33).

It is always important for the teacher to be aware of context in which he teaches the Juang learners and the process of teaching and learning as it helps to reflect on the various techniques used for teaching and work on them towards more effective teaching. To quote Gattegno, "awareness is needed to bring back what is known and work on it again to change it, make it more conscious, more precise, more useful and connected with other ... knowledge"(17). For example, a teacher has been teaching a text. In course of time, he realizes that the learners do not pay their attention and not interested in learning the text. The suddenly realizes that the text contains an event which is unfamiliar to them. To draw their attention and interest, the teacher replaces that piece of event with an event related to Juang culture. This brings learners into the class instead of pushes them out. And when a teacher performs this action, she/he deals with the following things:

- i) an awareness
- ii) the content of that awareness
- iii) knowledge of the Juang culture.

Therefore, awareness is very crucial to measure the degree of success in teaching as well as in learning to teach. In such contexts, a teacher may ask the following questions to himself:

- i) Is the teacher aware of the way he is interacting to students or vice versa? Is he aware of his role as a facilitator?
- ii). Is he aware of the way he can modify the process of teaching and learning? Is aware of how far does his modification work?
- iii) Is he aware of student's existing knowledge? Is he aware of how can that prior knowledge be used to illicit learner's response?

This awareness is the most useful technique to develop as a teacher and provide effective teaching. The sooner a teacher is aware of these, the better for learners. Being aware of the teaching-learning process, a teacher can improve his knowledge and skill of teaching English, and also reconstruct his/her attitude towards it.

Thus, we see that these four constituent and most importantly the last one is of immense help for teaching English. It would not be wrong to posit that these four constituents are the

building blocks for teacher's decision making.

Multilingual Approach

It is usually seen that most of the tribal schools use the centrally produced material and so is seen here. When we bring such materials to Juang schools, students are introduced to English language, English culture, Some texts having Odia culture which are taught through Odia language. In addition to this, there is a wide gap between the kind of exposure that mainstream learners get and the kind of exposure Juang learners get outside the class leading to the gap in linguistic knowledge. But the materials used for both are pitched at the same level. All these processes create a heavy cognitive load as they are facing two alien languages and cultures (English and Odia) with gap in linguistic level at the cost of giving up their L1 i.e., Juang language and also their own culture. As they pass more and more through this situation, they tend to develop inferior complexity and switch over to Odia language. This not only makes the process of teaching and learning futile but also holds the school curriculum responsible for the **language genocide**.

It will be effective if the centrally produced material is replaced by locally produced material. By locally produced material, it means that it must incorporate learners' prior knowledge of their society and culture. Language will be exposed to them through their own Juang culture. As a result, their cognitive load will go down and learning will be joyful through familiar context. And the medium of instruction should be changed to Juang language, which would result in better comprehension and interaction. It can be continued till the learners master the 'Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency' (CALP). Once they acquire this level, they can "think in abstract ways and carry on cognitively demanding tasks that are part of the centrally produced materials" (jillrobbins.com). In other words, until the learners acquire CALP, they should be exposed to English through the familiar context. Once they acquire it, they will gradually be exposed to unfamiliar context so that they can cope up with the global situation in their future. Thus, the indigenous language can be as an asset to teach English at the initial stage as the first language learning proficiencies can be transferred to the second language learning context according to the iceberg theory of Cummins. The assumption is that on the surface the first and second languages appear to be functioning in isolation but under the surface there are academic and intellectual processes that are common to both languages.

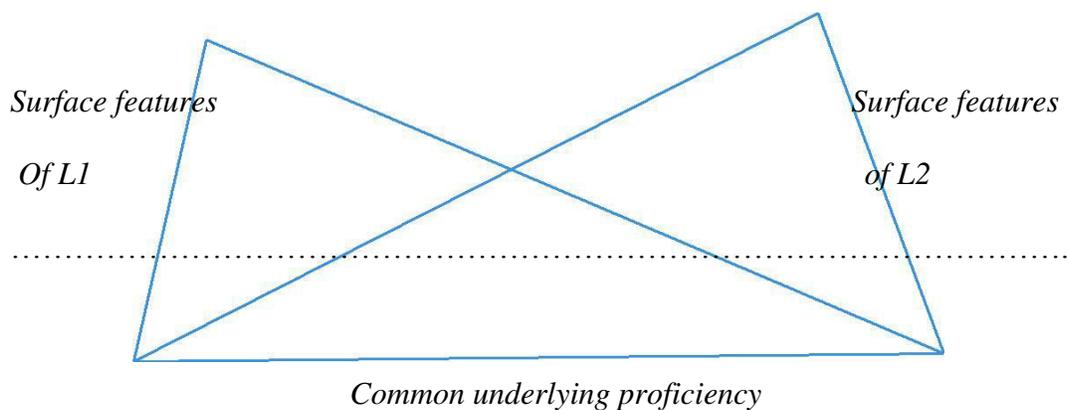


Figure: Iceberg Theory

Therefore, what is necessary is a well-researched curriculum that would not only provide a successful and joyful learning to the Juang students incorporating their own culture but also develop linguistic respect and save their mother tongue. The study carried by Mr. Kar and Dr. Mohanand proved that Juang learners have very positive response to the text having their own culture compared to their prescribed text. “They do not feel a sense of alienation in the classroom when their forms of culture and language are used in the second language classroom” (15). Krashen also shares the same view, “if there are no cultural elements in the second language classroom, the learners feel alienated from the classroom”.

Teacher Training and Development

To resolve the problems discussed above for effective teaching and learning, the teacher is the immediate source. For this, the teachers especially teaching in a tribal context having different socio-cultural set up need special training to equip them with the knowledge of tribal society and culture and the skill that is required to translate this knowledge into successful teaching. As it is highly impossible to design materials for each group of indigenous learners in India, the teachers need to be trained how to elicit the language resources from learners and make use of these for classroom interaction. And most importantly, they should be trained to reconstruct their attitude and be aware of the techniques applying in a specific situation: do they lead to effective learning, if not, are they required to be changed or modified and so on. Subsequently, this awareness would lead to the development of the teachers.

Conclusion

Thus, the effectiveness of teacher's decision making while teaching English in Juang or any tribal context is based on the confluence of four important constituents: socio-cultural knowledge, skill required to implement that knowledge, reconstruction of attitude, and awareness. Therefore, the teachers teaching in such contexts should be trained to teach and also learn to teach keeping the study of these four constituents along with multilingual approach in mind.

Reference:

- Gattegno, C. *The science of education*. New York: Educational Solutions. 1987. Print.
- Carter, R. “Development of L2 Communicative Competence”. *jillribbons.com*. George Washington University. Web. 23 Dec. 2014.
- Mohanand, A, Kar, H. “Blending the Oral with the Digital: Technology for Learners from Oral Traditions”. *Making the English Classroom More Inclusive*. IJELLS. April 2014. Web. 24 March. 2014.
- Freeman, D. “Teacher Training Development and Decision Making”. *Jstor.org*. TESOL Quarterly. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.
- Krashen, Stephen D. *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*. Portsmouth NH: Heineman. 2003. Print.
- “Tribes of Keonjhar District”. *Kendujhar.nic.in*. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.