

### Problems faced by English Teachers in Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh

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#### Abstract

*Teaching and learning is a two-way process. Hence, feedback of teaching-learning experiences must highlight the needs and expectations of both learners and teachers. It is often observed that school managements and parents tend to put the onus onto teachers, especially, English language teachers, if students are unable to understand topics being taught in classrooms. Learning, especially, language learning, does not take place by confining children within the four walls of a classroom or by merely making them memorise some grammatical rules. There are other factors as well that contribute to language learning and competence, which only a language teacher would be able to shed light on. The present study tries to identify some of the common problems faced by English language teachers in teaching the language in the Doimukh area of Arunachal Pradesh. A face-to-face survey was conducted to identify the problems being faced by English language teachers in the area.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Elementary education is the first stage of compulsory education that children gain after few years of formal schooling. Therefore, it lays the foundation on which a child's successive education is built.

In Arunachal Pradesh, elementary education is chiefly imparted through

English as a medium of instruction. But most students at this stage in the State are not fluent in the language, making it difficult to comprehend other subjects as well. This, in turn, encourages rote learning, which hampers their academic performance.

It is often observed that teachers are held responsible, if students face

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difficulty in comprehending various concepts, especially, in cases, where the mode of instruction is English. Learning, particularly, language learning, does not take place in isolation, or by being confined within the four walls of a classroom, or by merely cramming grammatical rules without understanding the concepts. There are many other factors that contribute to language learning and only a language teacher can point those out.

### **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Problems are always highlighted from the students' point of view. It is rare that teachers' feedback is collated. This study tries to identify some of the problems being faced by teachers, teaching English language at the elementary stage, in Arunachal Pradesh's Doimukh region.

### **DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

Twenty-three teachers, teaching English in 17 elementary schools [both private and government, affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE)] in the Doimukh region of Arunachal Pradesh were surveyed as part of the study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The 23 teachers were selected through purposive sampling technique. All teachers were surveyed face-to-face through focussed interviews. A coding

system was adopted, wherein, each teacher was assigned an alphabetical code like A, B, C, etc., to keep their identities confidential. Only one question was asked to the interviewees, i.e., "Do you face any problem(s) in teaching English?" All interviews were recorded and a photo of each interviewee was taken for records.

### **FINDINGS**

Some of the major problems identified by English teachers in Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, are as follows.

#### **Lack of fluency**

Most students are not fluent in English (spoken and written), and hence, are unable to understand the subjects being taught in classrooms as the medium of instruction is English. Teacher B, who teaches English to students of Classes VII and VIII at a government school in Doimukh, said, "Students are unable to understand when we speak in English. This is not the case only in lower classes but in higher classes as well, where 50–70 per cent students don't follow the lessons being taught. Even if they understand, they are unable to answer the questions orally. The main problem is that they cannot converse in English. However, if asked to write, they may be able to do so."

Therefore, teachers have to translate the entire chapter into Hindi, as it is the connecting and communicating language of the State. This consumes a lot of class

time, which could otherwise be utilised in some productive teaching–learning activity. Moreover, as teachers translate the entire chapter into Hindi in order to simplify it, the students are ‘unintentionally’ denied the opportunity to polish their communication skills, especially, spoken English.

Many teachers also shared that apart from lack of fluency, students mispronounced quite a number of English words as the language in the area is heavily influenced by local dialects. They added that the students committed a lot of spelling mistakes as a result of mispronunciation.

Teacher D cited an example of how ‘apple’ was often pronounced as ‘aapel’. She also spoke about the influence of local dialects on differentiating between the pronunciation of ‘p’ and ‘f’ sounds like ‘pineapple’ was often pronounced as ‘pineaffle’. She said students often acquired the incorrect pronunciation of many words and were not even willing to correct themselves.

The teachers further shared that due to lack of fluency, the students were even hesitant to ask questions or clarify their doubts. All these reflect the low confidence and poor communication skills of the students. Thus, the classroom environment becomes teacher dominated as pointed out by Hosseini (2007). Therefore, with hardly any feedback received from the learners, it becomes difficult for them to evaluate the

effectiveness of the teaching–learning exercise, which is a two–way process.

They opined that one may cram formulas, rules and facts, but communication is a skill, which can only be acquired, developed and mastered with practice, that too, over a period of time.

### **Defence mechanism behaviour**

Teacher I, teaching at a government school in the area, said that students in government schools were hesitant and scared to communicate in English, and hence, conversed only in Hindi or some other local dialect. This may, perhaps, be said to be a defence mechanism to compensate for their lack of fluency in English and in tandem with the fact that most government school students come from an ‘English illiterate’ background. Moreover, in their rural and agrarian lifestyle, they see no scope for English. Their learning of English is limited to the curriculum only (Akbari, 2015).

### **Literal translation**

Another concern of the teachers was that when the students needed to write or speak in English, most of them would think in Hindi or their mother tongue, and do a literal translation. According to Seng and Hashim (2006), it is human behaviour to think in one’s mother tongue before starting to write or speak in a foreign language. However, it becomes a problem, if the translation is literal.

### **Influence of code mixing**

Some teachers pointed out that one aspect of code mixing, i.e., the use of SMS (Short Message Service) or text or chat language, posed a problem in English language learning. Chat language like 'TY' for 'thank you', 'ur' for 'your', etc., has even reached classrooms, and students find it trendy and easy to use.

Another problem that the teachers shared was the replacement of formal English with SMS or chat language, and attaching '-ing' suffix to Hindi words while conversing in English like "are you *chalo*-ing (coming) with me?" One of the researchers experienced this first hand, as in the midst of an interview, a Class II boy came to complain to a teacher about another student. The boy said, "Ma'am, I am *batao*-ing (telling) you, xyz is *batao*-ing (calling) me a liar. Please scold him."

It was realised from teachers' feedback that the students did not understand that such language was not acceptable in formal situations like classroom setting. Moreover, they felt that using such language made one an expert in English and improved one's status among peers. This pattern of adding '-ing' suffix to Hindi words shows the learners' dependence on their mother tongue, i.e., Hindi. Odey, et al., (2014), in their study, pointed out that the use of SMS language by students adversely affected their writing skills. They found that in essay writing, of the total grammatical errors,

the maximum, i.e., about 26 per cent comprised omission of vowels like 'before' becomes 'b4'. The second highest number of errors was that of homophones like writing 'r' for 'are' and 'd' for 'the'.

### **Limited exposure of parents to the English language**

Almost all teachers opined that parents played a vital role in a child's language learning. They emphasised the importance of home environment in language learning. Many students in Doimukh are first generation English language learners or come from families, where parents have limited proficiency in the language. As many parents are unable to teach English to their wards, they expect schools and teachers to do the needful.

### **Change of school**

Teacher G, teaching Classes V to VII at a private school in Doimukh, said, "Students frequently change schools, i.e., a few leave the school in mid of a session or at the onset of a new session, and a few are new admission. So, it is initially difficult to bring the new admissions at par with others." Other teachers also opined change of school to be a major impediment for students in the course of learning the English language as children from different schools come with varied learning experiences. This increases the workload of the teachers as they have to repeat a topic several times. This, especially, holds true in case of

students, who shift from government to private schools.

### **Teachers' proficiency stunted**

Teacher M shared that it was challenging for her and many other teachers to speak fluently in English as they did not get enough opportunity to converse in the language in their daily lives. The only place they spoke the language was school, that too, while taking the class, where they had to translate the entire chapter into Hindi. Due to the limited participation of students, who are heavily dependent on translation, the English language skills of these teachers also get adversely affected. Lalsangpuii (2015) reports lack of social set-up to use the language to be a major challenge. Research studies reveal that more than 20 languages are spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. But the State does not have a single common indigenous language spoken by all.

### **Lack of motivation for teachers**

The researchers point out that not only students but teachers, too, lack motivation. They do not get appreciated for the efforts they put in to develop English language skills in students. Besides, the underperformance of students and lack of interest during the teaching-learning process in classrooms also discourage them. According to Behraam, et al., (2015), Abdulla and Mustafa (2015), Kalia (2017) and Tok (2017), untrained teachers are a hindrance to language learning.

### **Inadequate resources and infrastructure**

This issue was highlighted only by teachers teaching in government schools, where NCERT textbooks are taught. According to them, there is no separate NCERT English grammar textbook and only a few grammar exercises are given at the end of each chapter in English textbooks meant for the elementary stage, which is insufficient. Balo (2016); Kapoor and Lhungdim (2016); Khamari, et al., (2014); and Upadhya (2012), too, have questioned the quality of English textbooks being used in many schools of the country.

Teacher B said, "The CBSE frames the syllabus as per the standards of English (of students) in metropolitan cities. This syllabus is not suited to States like Arunachal Pradesh as we don't have the required infrastructure like language labs, etc. We only use conventional methods of teaching, i.e., chalk-and-talk and lecture. Therefore, we cannot hold only the students responsible for all problems."

### **Lacunae in evaluation**

Three teachers, two from government schools and one from a private school, criticised the evaluation system being practised in their schools for the absence of spelling, dictation and spoken English tests. Khamari, et al., (2014) and Rahman (2011), too, voice this concern. However, it may be suggested that giving spelling

and dictation tests to children, as well as, inculcating reading habit in them may be encouraged through reading exercises, classroom discussions and other oral activities.

### **Lack of interest among students**

All teachers unanimously opined that students were highly distracted and inattentive in class due to their lack of interest in the subject. As a result, they repeatedly made the same mistake(s) in basic things like use of capital and small letters of the English alphabet, punctuation marks, etc. Teacher 'F' said, "Their attention span is (very) limited...10 minutes at the most. So, it's a challenge for us to retain their attention."

The lack of interest is due to unattractive and mundane school curriculum. Ahmadpour (2004) and Hosseini (2007), too, blame the obsolete curriculum for failing to attract and retain the interest of the students.

### **Effect of 'No Detention Policy'**

Many teachers pointed out that even students with poor academic performance were promoted to the next class. Teacher O said, "Teachers teaching lower classes do not do their job properly. As a result, we are overloaded when (incompetent) students are promoted to higher classes. We don't know what to do — whether to teach the basics or focus on the syllabus." Teacher P shared

an incident when she had to teach a Class VII student to write the small letter 'a' of the English alphabet. She added that many students in Class VIII, too, wrote without any distinction between capital and small letters of the English alphabet.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The findings of the study highlight the following areas that need to be worked upon.

- School managements and teachers must work towards improving English language skills in students.
- There should be a separate grammar textbook for the elementary level.
- The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) must be made fully functional with qualified professionals, rather than deputed administrators manning it. This is necessary to ensure a localised curriculum suited to the State.
- There is an urgent need to establish language labs in all government and private schools of the region.
- Since language involves four skills, i.e., Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW), the evaluation for language competency must take into account the examination of all these skills.

- New language learning methods and approaches like Community Language Learning (CLL) must also be adopted.
- In-service teacher training must be provided to language teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it may be concluded that most of the problems, as identified by the teachers, are interrelated. Issues, such as lack of fluency in English, literal translation, influence of code mixing,

students exhibiting a behaviour of defence mechanism, limited exposure of parents to the English language, etc., in addition to tangible factors like lack of appropriate infrastructure and resources, etc., are all interrelated causes that affect English language learning among elementary school students in the area. To ensure effective learning, all four language skills — Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing — must be emphasised in classrooms.

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