

English Teaching Materials in Madrasas: Teachers' Views

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the views of English language teachers in using teacher-prepared or locally available materials for teaching English in the Madrasas. The data for the study is collected from five teachers working in four Madrasas in Hyderabad using interviews. The findings touch on the teachers' use of state-prescribed textbooks, teacher-prepared and locally available materials. The results show how teachers make the English texts relevant to students by incorporating elements of religious texts.

Keywords: English language materials, Madrasas, state-prescribed textbooks, teacher-prepared resources

Introduction

Teachers' use of instructional materials constitutes language input that learners receive. These also include activities carried out in the classroom including printed materials, non-print materials (audio-visual materials), and materials that comprise both (Richards, 2001). The use of instructional materials also helps teachers to expand their teaching repertoire across individual needs by using cultural and contextual inputs (Crawford, 2002). The word 'material' is understood as a resource, a source, a reference source, a resource for reference and learning, and a source to support teachers' instruction (Cunningsworth, 1995; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Richards, 2001). In this article, the term material is used comprehensively, taking note of the cultural and learning contexts, pedagogic and ideological functions, and the varied forms and genres of

teaching material. In this article, I attempt to understand teachers' views on the selection and adaptation of materials in Madrasas.

Context

The Muslim community school or Madrasa is a system of alternative education for Muslims, the religious minorities in India. These schools fulfil the educational needs of the socially marginalized communities by providing free education. The Madrasas are autonomous or *Azad*, i.e. they are not affiliated to any Board of Education. This autonomy allows each Madrasa to define their aims of education, design their curriculum and the related content, and adapt their teaching methods. Most of the students who study in these schools are first-generation learners. English is taught at different levels in the Madrasas. In some Madrasas, English is taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Madrasas A).

In contrast, students from 6 to 15 years opt to learn English either at the entry or the beginners' levels. English teaching aims at developing functional competence in students. This study discusses the basis on which teachers use the local materials or prepare their materials in four Madrasas.

Method

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews of five teachers teaching in four Madrasas in Hyderabad. The names of the teachers and the Madrasas are masked to protect their privacy. The teachers in the Madrasas were selected based on their level of English proficiency, which was moderate, and high proficiency in Urdu and Arabic with a good understanding of the religious texts. The pedagogy was to teach English through Urdu using the translation method. Efforts were made to sample different types of Madrasas. Table 1 gives the names of teachers and Madrasas and the class at which English is taught. The findings provide insights into why teachers use teacher-prepared or state-prescribed textbooks for teaching English

Table 1: Teachers, Madrasas and Class at which English is Taught

Teachers	Madrasas	Class at which Teachers Teach English in Madrasas
Teacher 1 & 2	Madrasa A	<i>Alim</i> (Undergraduate course) <i>Fazil</i> (Graduate course) <i>Nazira</i> (Entry-level) <i>Special class English</i> (<i>Spoken English and General English</i>) <i>Ibtedayi</i> (beginner course to refine basic knowledge of Urdu, and English alphabets and simple words. Comprises 6-15-year-old students).
Teacher 3	Madrasa B	<i>Ibtedayi</i> <i>Aedadiya</i> (beginner level course in Urdu, Arabic, and English vocabulary, simple sentences, and English grammar basics). (Comprises 13 to 15-year-old students)
Teacher 4	Madrasa C	<i>Ibtedayi</i> <i>Aedadiya</i>
Teacher 5	Madrasa D	Not tied to any class but provides literacy skills to students from 6 to 15 years

Findings

Madrasa A

In Madrasa A, the state government prescribed textbooks for English teaching is used in *Alim* for first-year students. For the second and third-year students, teachers adapt and use local texts in addition to the state-prescribed books. In the fourth year (the final year), teachers use the textbook meant for the Bachelor of Arts first year and teach *Islamic Studies* of the Grade Seven book—a local text through English.

In *Fazil*, students are taught the state English textbooks meant for Bachelor of Arts second and the third year. In *Nazira* (Entry-level) and Special Class in English courses, local English textbooks are used to teach Islamic Studies. These books are in the form of Pre-Primers, and grades one and two textbooks. The *Ibtedayi* course (Beginner course) uses the English textbook of grade three to teach *Islamic Studies*, again a local resource.

The teachers of English shared that the selection of the local materials to teach English was based on the criterion that the materials should help to learn English through content familiar to them—the religious content. For instance, Islamic Studies starts with the first chapter's lesson on 'Allah and His Creations' for grades one, three, and seven. Students are familiar with this content, so it is easier to connect to the English textbooks. The theme is the same across the three grades, but the sentences and the content become complex in higher classes.

Grade seven resource book has reference to verses from the Holy Book, which the students in their primary classes master. When the students read the English textbook content, they easily relate to the verses from the Book that they mastered in Arabic.

No prescribed textbooks are used to teach English grammar in the *Nazira*; instead, teachers prepare in-house materials to teach the basic grammar. Teachers of this school also developed religious stories in English to motivate reading for pleasure. Teacher 2 used '*Spoken English*' by Namrata Palta as a reference material as she considered it to be written in a simple language and helped her know the correct pronunciation. Pronunciation and other information that the teacher gained from the book were used in the class. Teacher 1 had proposed to the management to provide short storybooks in the library for the students to read in their free time to develop reading skills.

Madrasa B

The course on English was in the initial stages of implementation at the time of the study, leaving teachers free to select the kinds of materials they wanted to use. The teacher gauged a student's proficiency during verbal interaction during admission to the *Aedadiya* (beginner level course). Based on the findings, they prepared materials in English for imparting religious education. The use of simple self-prepared material was a strategy of teachers to build rapport with students. These materials helped the students get comfortable with the new language and practise basic sentence structures thoroughly. Subsequently, the teacher used the prescribed Class 8 state board English textbook with long paragraphs for reading and solving textbook exercises.

Madrasa C

The third Madrasa consisted of students with varying levels of exposure to English. The Madrasa was the first brush with education for some

students, and they joined either the *Ibtedayi* or *Aedadiya*. Some students had studied in the mainstream school up to the fourth or the fifth class; the remaining had studied through English medium up to Class 9 or 10. Both these groups joined the *Alim*. Teachers accordingly used different strategies to deal with the three groups of students. The teacher prepared resources to teach children of the first group, like materials for the English alphabet and simple words. When the teacher felt that students had gained familiarity with English vocabulary, they used the state textbook of Class 1. The *My English World— Class 1*, published by the State Government, for Telugu and Urdu medium schools was used for the *Ibtedayi*; and for *Aedadiya*, the teacher used *Studies in Islam* Grade One book to teach English. For *Alim* I, II and III, the teacher used state-prescribed textbooks. For the *Alim*, I *Studies in Islam*, the teacher used grade two, in *Alim* II, *My English World, Class IV* and *Islamic Studies* of grade three, and for *Alim* III, *My English World Class V* and *Islamic Studies*, grade four was used. The teacher also held grammar classes using the *English Grammar and Composition Part I* by Deccan Traders.

In Madrasa C, one finds that the teacher uses a variety of materials in the same class based on the students' levels of learning. The teacher could inform the management/in-charge if they felt they did not need a particular textbook section because the content level was too high for the students.

Madrasa D

Madrasa D is not tied to any class. Students were taught on the basis of their level of English proficiency. The teacher used *My English World* for Classes one and two in accordance with students' proficiency. Both these are state-prescribed textbooks. Her use was to ensure that these students did not feel that they were learning something different from other students. The teacher also maintained that using the prescribed textbooks helped students adapt when they joined other schools after completing Hifz (This is a final course by the end of which students would have basic knowledge of English and have read and memorized the Quran). She used the teacher-prepared resources to teach spoken English because she felt students needed to speak basic English.

Discussion

The English teachers of this study were graduates from Madrasas with moderate proficiency in English and high proficiency in Urdu and

Arabic. These teachers had an understanding of the community values and were familiar with the religious literature. This section presents teachers' views on the materials they use and the reasons for using them.

N.S. Prabhu observed:

...centrally produced materials can achieve quality not by being highly specific in their content and arrangement, but by being maximally flexible and adjustable, not by being highly structured but by being loosely structured, not by guarding against alteration by teachers but by providing for and encouraging alternation or substitution in different ways. (2019a, p. 85, 2019b)

Teachers shared that the management approved all the materials used by them. In the case of teacher-prepared material, the teachers informed the management about what was being taught. The use of materials shows a mix of the top-down (state-prescribed materials) and bottom-up approach (teacher-prepared materials).

This study shows that the Madrasa teachers blend state-prescribed textbooks, teacher-prepared materials, and locally available resources like articles in newspapers or magazines. Teachers used state-prescribed textbooks to ensure that students got the benefit of mainstream education. Teachers used the local materials or teacher-prepared materials for students to reach the prescribed textbook level. The following purposes underlie its use at the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels:

the beginner level

- for making students comfortable with English
- to teach alphabets, rhymes and counting
- to facilitate simple readings from religious texts

at the intermediate level

- to teach grammar, idioms
- write essays on computers, the concept of society

at the advanced level

- local materials adapted and used to train students to translate religious texts from English to Arabic or vice versa.

Hence, considerable thought goes into the needs of students and ways of dealing with them.

Since teachers and students share similar social and cultural backgrounds, they are mindful of the learners' reason for joining Madrasas and use materials to help students meet their instrumental needs of English. Since the teachers know the religious texts, they help students connect the religious and English textbooks.

Conclusion

The following four main factors guide a teacher's perspective to adapt a language teaching material to suit the students' social and cultural milieu.

- The use of management approved materials to meet the societal aim to include English so that the Madrasas' curriculum is on par with any mainstream school's curriculum;
- To calibrate the material to the proficiency levels that students require in higher education and work;
- To adapt the text to enable students to use the basic structures of English within and outside the school; and,
- To make the English text relevant to the students by leveraging on religious texts and knowledge.

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