
Addressing the Challenges in Teaching English in Uttarkashi Government Schools

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Abstract

This article reports the challenges English language teachers face in government primary schools of Bhatwari Block, Uttarkashi and proposes some measures to address them. Data was collected through four classroom observations and discussions with twenty teachers. The findings show that some of the challenges are: (a) teachers find students' literacy skills in their first language inadequate, (b) do not connect textbook contents to real-world, (c) emphasize grammar and correct spellings, (d) perceive English to be an unsystematic language, and (e) inadequate preparedness among teachers for English language teaching. The article ends with a few pedagogical suggestions.

Keywords: National Curriculum Framework (NCF), Voluntary Teacher Forum (VTF), telephonic conferences, webinars

Introduction

पांच कोस पर पानी बदले और चार कोस पर वाणी

PANCH KOS¹ PAR PANI BADALE AUR CHAR KOS PAR VANI

(The (taste of) water changes every 9 miles and language every 7.2)

—A Folk Saying

This saying reflects the rich culture of language in the country. According to the *Indian Express* (2019):

There are 19,500 dialects and 121 languages in India. English in India is accepted as a second language because it is a global language,

meets people's aspirations, and enables access to quality literature in English (NCERT, 2006a).

Context

The study is situated in the Bhatwari block, north of the district Uttarkashi below the high mountains of the Himalayas. This region is a remote part of the state of Uttarakhand. Natives mostly speak the Garwarhi language. According to the Block Resource Centre (BRC), the Bhatwari block has 113 primary schools with 204 teachers. Of these, 28 schools work with a single teacher. Therefore, a teacher must teach all subjects regardless of their expertise in those subjects. Teachers often struggle to teach English.

Methodology

In the Bhatwari block, teachers attend Voluntary Teachers' Forum² (VTF) to share their classroom practices, discuss the challenges they face in their classrooms, and learn better teaching methods. In these sessions, the discussion was generated with twenty teachers on various topics related to English language teachings, such as the importance of comprehensible inputs, a print-rich environment, code-mixing and switching, and enhancing language skills through stories and rhymes. These discussions provided data on the challenges and concerns of teachers. In addition, I observed classrooms³ of four teachers to understand their pedagogical practices in teaching English and to think of ways of addressing them.

Challenges of Teaching English

Inadequate Literacy Skills in First Language

The primary argument of teachers is that children do not have grade-appropriate reading and writing skills in their first language; therefore, it is difficult for them to learn English. In the Garhwal, students speak Garhwali at home, different from Hindi. They learn Hindi only in schools which makes English their third language. The low literacy skills of children in their first language are supported by the ASER (2018) survey, which reports that only 27.2 per cent of grade 3 and 50.3 per cent of grade 5 students in government schools can read grade 2 level text.

The teachers' argument assumes importance in the face of the interdependence hypothesis put forward by Cummins (1991). According

to this hypothesis, knowledge of other languages builds on the first language. When students have acquired basic competency in their first language and are introduced to the second language, they will transfer their knowledge to the second contributing to the ease of its learning.

Children have the potential to learn several languages. However, this potential is not leveraged for learning another language in schools. A teacher must leverage the knowledge of the first language so that students' proficiency levels in the second language can be enhanced. One way to do this is for the teacher to connect the content to the learner's world. I observed a teacher teaching the word 'apple'. The teacher did not connect it to the word सेब /seb/ in Hindi. The English textbook is full of words from children's surrounding environment—like a chair, table, clock, fruit, etc. The leveraging can begin by connecting these words to the ones they already know.

Grammar and the Insistence on Correct Pronunciation

In teaching English, teachers focus on grammar and emphasize the correct usage. For instance, I observed Class 2 students trying to memorize the definition of a noun. I asked a few children to provide some examples. Interestingly, the definition and examples of nouns were the same as those I learned in my school 25 years ago. Students could merely repeat the definition and the examples given in their notebooks.

English pedagogy focuses on teaching correct pronunciation. Teachers always correct the learners' pronunciations. Students are punished or taunted when words are mispronounced, increasing their hesitation to speak English, and hampering fluency. Learners at the early stages should be encouraged to use the language rather than be put off by emphasizing correctness.

Increasing exposure to English provides chances for generalization, reasoning, and word recognition. Teachers can provide a list of singular and plural words and allow students to generalize the rule of making plurals. I heard a child saying, "lion goed to the jungle", here the teacher should appreciate that the child had recognized that the suffix "ed" is used to denote past tense.

In the case of spelling, I remember a 6-year-old child reading 'cent' as 'kent', and I did not correct her but later used the correct pronunciation while talking to her. A few days later, I found her reading similar

words correctly. Exposure to a lot of reading enriches the vocabulary and learning correct spelling. So, it is not necessary to correct wrong pronunciations.

It is essential to understand the issue with English pronunciation. An individual's mother tongue influences pronunciation in other languages, giving us different accents. Indians speak English with either Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam, or other accents. It does not take away the beauty of any language. At the same time, no two people can speak identically. We are living entities and have individuality instead of being like mechanical robots. However, it is necessary to understand each other and meet some minimum standards. Exposure to various speakers like speakers in different news channels, sports commentary, current affairs programmes, and serials will provide the diversity required to enable our ears to become more sensitive in making meaning out of the sounds we hear.

There is no harm if students make mistakes. In my observation, a student pronounced 'but' as 'boot' like the sound in 'put'. Eventually, the child automatically learns the correct pronunciation and usage with more exposure to the language. Mistakes should be viewed positively as pattern identification by the child.

The pedagogy followed in the English classroom was that as soon as the children learnt the alphabet, simple words and sentences, there is a jump to learning grammar without meaning making. They are also told the meaning of English words in the first language without giving any context. I witnessed children learn rapidly when instructions were given in a grade-appropriate meaningful context. For example, when a Class 2 student spoke in a low voice, the teacher said, "Can you be a bit louder please." The same girl requested the teacher the next day, "Can you be a bit louder please." Consequently, using such simple sentences like: 'you are looking very pretty today', 'it is an important point', 'help me find out', etc. is analogous to speech in their mother tongue. Such usages stimulate the language learning process.

The Perception of English as an Unsystematic Language

In classrooms, students are involved in reading aloud or copying from the textbook or the board and memorizing the spellings. Teachers justify the process of rote learning based on the view that English has an unsystematic nature. Teachers say that if we tell something in one

context, it is not applicable in another. For instance, sometimes C sounds /K/ (hard C) and sometimes /S/ (Soft C). The same happens with singular/plural, verb forms in present/past tense, etc.

My understanding is that such irregularities exist in every language. There are 26 alphabets and 44 sounds in English and 52 letters in Hindi. One way of looking at this is that learning 26 letters is easier than learning 52. Teachers must read aloud or share reading the planned text that has the target words repeatedly appearing in various contexts. The next step could be an exercise to find speech patterns with ample exposure to relevant and meaningful text. For example, a teacher could state the aim of writing more than 100 words starting with the letter C. In this exercise, a teacher asks students for different words and writes these on the board. The teacher must divide the words into two columns according to soft C '/S/' and hard C "/K/" sounds. This classification would help children recognize the pattern and generalize those words in which 'C' is followed by 'a', 'o' and 'u' with the /K/ sound.

Inadequate Teachers Preparedness

Teachers' comfort in using the language is a major challenge in teaching English. Many teachers accept that they do not have the competence to teach English effectively. They can hardly manage to read English textbooks. The NCF (2006a) also recognizes this issue. They hesitate to speak in English, and their reading and comprehension are inadequate. Lack of confidence in English restricts their ability to provide a language-rich environment. Teachers must consider themselves as co-learners with students as both improve their language skills when practising each aspect of usage (NCF, 2005a). There should be a positive attitude towards English and a motivation to learn it. In contrast, a few teachers have good pronunciation and knowledge of English grammar. However, they lack pedagogical knowledge.

A Suggestion for Addressing Challenges

One way to address these challenges is to provide a language-rich environment to nurture skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (NCF 2006a, 2006b). There must be a lot of aural and oral inputs like morning assembly, where children not only listen to others but speak too. Assembly activities might be the students introducing themselves, talking about their favourite fruit, etc. Similarly, mealtimes are open

to informal talk. Learners can also enjoy the English language while talking to each other in play situations. Children must be allowed to speak, read, and write English with a positive attitude regardless of its correctness. Corrections lower learners' confidence in the early stages of learning a language. While speaking, their priority must be on the content rather than getting the grammar right. The emphasis should be on meaning-making.

English should not be limited to English classrooms. Teachers can introduce a one-day activity devoted to English, calling it the English Day. Many more strategies can be adopted to ensure better learning. Using audio-video (ICT) would be an effective strategy to create a language-rich environment. Cartoon programmes like *papa pig*, *Dora the explorer*, and *Motu Patlu* help learners to relate to the second language with interest. I have observed children use specific short phrases like; *Yes, I can do it* (from *Dora*). Most importantly, they use these phrases correctly. These activities increase exposure to English. Using simple sentences like: 'you are looking very pretty today', 'it is an important point', 'help me find out' model the language use and stimulate the language learning process.

The lack of appropriate English print material is another major challenge in English teaching. Besides aural and oral inputs, a print-rich environment is an essential constituent of a language-rich environment (NCF, 2006b). The print-rich environment includes instructions written on a wall, children's work as a duty chart of the week, a storybook, a picture book without text or with a one-liner text, labelling of surrounding objects, and Emoji with text. These will create opportunities for students to increase their language competencies. Age and context-appropriate print material teaches children to read and write and helps develop interest, and leads to a reading habit.

Conclusion

A teacher should also tailor the teaching to individual needs with sensitivity to their emotional needs. Language learning is not a mechanical process; instead, it is ever evolving. It includes feelings, emotions, aptitude, and social, economic, and cultural aspects. It becomes crucial to consider learners' socio-physical well-being in this pandemic situation. The government school students are from disadvantaged backgrounds and migrant children.

Kumar (1986) believes that language shapes a child's personality, including perceptions, attitudes, abilities, interests, and values. Language is a medium to express personal feelings, connect, know, and think critically. The teacher's fundamental responsibility is to strengthen a child's holistic physical, cognitive, and affective development and to nurture Constitutional values. Teachers must know various aspects of language learning and combine theoretical knowledge with their teaching context. A language-rich environment in schools will enhance the language learning process.

Notes

1. 1 kos is equal to 1.8 miles
2. Voluntary teachers' forum are purely voluntary where teachers devote their time without any government order. The VTF sessions last for two to three hours and once a month. During the Covid-19 lockdown, VTF meetings took place through T-CON or MS Teams.
3. A part of my responsibility includes visiting schools regularly, observing classrooms and talking to teachers and students.

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