

Harms of the Hidden Curriculum: Minimizing Them for ESL Teaching in India

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Abstract

The 'hidden curriculum' in the classroom plays a critical role in influencing learning. This article presents and discusses two encounters with practising teachers to unravel the English language assumptions held by them and their influence on teaching. In one encounter, the emphasis is on the use of received pronunciation, and in the other, the higher status occupied by English to the detriment of other languages is brought out. How these assumptions affect English language teaching is briefly discussed. The article ends by recommending that teacher educators reflect on their assumptions about language and teaching and their influence on learning and be more aware and sensitive to the harm that the hidden curriculum causes to students' learning.

Keywords: ESL teaching in India, hidden curriculum, teacher beliefs, standard language

Introduction

Schools as institutions are expected to contribute to and improve equity. However, scholars like Apple (1979) have suggested that schools are caught in a web of institutions and are responsible for perpetuating instead of removing societal inequalities. This reproduction of inequality happens due to the "educators' common-sense assumptions and practices about teaching and learning, normal and abnormal behaviour, important and unimportant knowledge..." says Apple (p. 64). Giroux (2001) focuses on the norms and principles learners experience in schools that contribute to what is called 'the hidden curriculum'. This curriculum is not academic or listed and yet leaves a significant impact on the learners'

attitudes and understanding of the world's workings. Abroampa (2020) considers it responsible for 'as much as 90% of the learning' in schools. This finding means that what is in the hidden curriculum is probably of greater importance than the 'stated objectives' of the curriculum. This observation is arguably even more true for the language learning context as attitudes and biases are carried in language much more than in the content subjects like science or subjects like mathematics. While the hidden curriculum is widely prevalent in schools—in the playground, classrooms, school assemblies, etc., this article is limited to the hidden curriculum in the classroom in teaching English as a second language (ESL) in India.

Hidden Curriculum in ESL

Teachers' conception of English language learning is crucial because we know that teachers pass on the hidden curriculum to their students knowingly or unknowingly. Nothing could be worse for a teacher than perpetuating anxieties about correctness and a sense of inferiority among students. These are driven by the colonial mindset that the British way of using English is better than the more achievable Indian variety of English and that multilingualism is a problem in the language learning context and not something to celebrate.

As mentioned earlier, the hidden curriculum gets implemented unintentionally and often so subtly that it misses notice. Even if the teacher is conscious of the choice of words and the ideas expressed in class, the hidden curriculum can be missed. Worse still is where the teachers are not even aware that the ideas they use in class may be obsolete.

The article hypothesizes that the teachers' perceptions about the power of the English language, the necessity to adhere to a standard, which variety to learn, etc., affect students' anxieties about learning the nuances of the language. The hidden curriculum affects students' behaviour in subtle ways. The aspects of power are particularly prone to using covert ideology (Althusser, 1970) and its persuasive power rather than overt actions of disciplining or exerting brute power. The argument reinforced in the article is that teachers' perceptions are likely to affect student behaviour and understanding in subtle ways, even though the stated objectives of the curriculum may not list these influences. This

consequence must impel us to focus even more on this aspect of teacher education.

Ideas concerning the teaching and learning of English have been witnessing changes, with newer conceptualizations shouldering out older ones continuously. Teachers are expected to keep themselves updated with these ideas to ensure the successful transaction of the curriculum in schools. The basic conceptualization of ESL has shifted from viewing language learning with a monolingual lens to one celebrating multilingualism, keeping with the lived reality in many parts of the world where several languages are used, with English being one of them. In the same way, ideas about the use of a privileged standard are frowned upon; except when they are used to orient the students so that they may choose what variety to suit their needs and preferences in particular contexts. Prescriptivist tendencies to place a particular variety as an ideal that everyone must approximate are beginning to be seen as problematic and unnecessary. Language learning and the educational transactions in the classroom are seen as co-creation by the teacher-facilitator and the students; students are individuals with minds possessing knowledge of the world (and the word) and not mere 'tabula rasa'. However, these ideas are neither widely prevalent nor deeply understood, resulting in a gap between the current understanding of what language is and how languages are learnt, and the currency that the old ideas still have, especially among teachers in schools. Nowhere is this more problematic than in what is called the 'hidden curriculum'. Teachers and teacher-educators need to be acutely aware of this when interacting with other teachers.

Many studies have focused on the hidden curriculum and materials (Kamasak et al., 2020), classroom transactions (Mei, 2015), and teaching or training methods (Lowe & Lawrence, 2018). This article discusses the hidden curriculum that reflects the attitude to English through two encounters with practising teachers. It describes the encounters and discusses their significance in the light of the hidden curriculum. These encounters led to the thinking that assumptions held by the English teachers, a part of the hidden curriculum, are likely to harm students.

Encounter 1

The first encounter concerns a tertiary level teacher's perception of the 'standard' British pronunciation of the English alphabet as a model to

be taught to students in India, even arguing for this as a tool to remove student anxiety and as an effective tool to ensure successful student learning.

In a group on WhatsApp of tertiary level teachers of English with varying levels of experience, a video that prescribed the ‘correct’ (British) pronunciation of the 26 letters of the English alphabet was posted by a teacher. (See Screenshot 1). This video generated an animated discussion.

The video also brought forth a contrary view—that the standard British way is not a desirable ideal for students in the Indian context and that efforts must be made to try and help them approximate to ‘General Indian English’ rather than to British or American standards. With this contrary view, the discussion became more heated. Amazingly, a senior teacher at the tertiary level of education holds the emphasis on British pronunciation with little idea of the harm caused to students because of such a view.

Screenshot 1: *The Forwarded Video*



(The phonemic transcription in the message reads “Dear friends, please share this video with your students and **ask them to practise the alphabet regularly.**” (Emphasis mine))

Encounter 2

The second encounter is with a teacher at a premier teacher education institution, holding the view that English holds an exalted position, and that the knowledge of English is sufficient to function in life. This multilingual teacher believes that English is more important than any Indian language. English is, for him, so important that he does not think it necessary to expose his children to their parents' mother tongues. His children are proficient in English and Hindi, and there is no effort to make them learn Maithili or Nepali, the languages of their father and mother. The daughter of this teacher refers to Hindi (and not Maithili or Nepali) as her mother tongue, and the children are not exposed to Maithili or Nepali. When questioned casually, the teacher said that his children did not know their mother tongue because they did not get exposure to their mother tongues. The fact that the parents could have used their languages to speak with the children as the first step for additive multilingualism was simply overlooked.

The privileged position allocated to English in the mind of the teacher comes through when he appreciates his daughter's ability to sing English songs ("I really don't know how she picked up these songs...") as if that is a valid sign of high proficiency in the language. While this is not an attempt at looking down at songs in English or one's ability to sing them, what is essential is this teacher of English's attitude towards his own languages and English. In his mind, it is enough for one to learn English and the other Indian languages are not necessary to be learnt.

Discussion

The teaching activities an English teacher uses in the classroom are determined not only by the stated curricular goals and syllabus but also by their beliefs about what is to be learnt and how. The two examples of teacher beliefs mentioned above gain special significance in this backdrop. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) mentions the ideas of 'knowledge co-construction and 'teacher as a facilitator', etc. The curriculum emphasizes 'communicative language teaching' (CLT) or 'task-based language teaching' (TBLT), etc. Nevertheless, if the teacher, through her own experience and learning, believes that language is best taught through a lecture without taking recourse to CLT techniques such as pair-work and group work, she is likely to lecture in class. This difference is overt and visible to anyone observing the goings-on in the

class. However, what kinds of student responses are appreciated by the teacher and what kinds are frowned upon, how much value the teacher assigns to other languages in the ESL classroom, etc., are aspects of the hidden curriculum, that are not as easily noticeable. Seen from this perspective, in the first encounter, the teacher believes that 'Received Pronunciation' (RP) reduces (and not increases) student anxieties; also, the teacher is likely to look down upon, if not chide, the students who speak divergently, even with a neutral General Indian English (GIE) accent. The student who finds it difficult, if not impossible, to pronounce certain sounds is likely to be the object of ridicule in this teacher's class, arguably for no fault of theirs.

In the second encounter, the teacher believes that (a) English is sacrosanct and that (b) the use of other languages in ESL classrooms places students at a disadvantage, and that therefore, the curricular and perhaps even the non-curricular transactions need to be exclusively in English. The hidden curriculum, in this case, would lead to looking down on using any other language in the classroom.

Decisions in the classroom are based on the answers to several of these questions teachers can ask themselves:

- What is language?
- How is a language learnt?
- Can the use of another language in the English class be allowed/ tolerated/ encouraged?
- How important is English in the linguistic landscape around the teacher and learners?
- Should English share space with other languages or replace them?
- What is the mother tongue of students?
- How important is it for children to learn other languages (s)?
- What variety of English should a teacher teach?
- How close to the British or American 'standard' must students adhere? (Or should they adhere to this at all?)
- Should the class remain silent during the class? ('pin-drop silence')
- Is some happy noise a sign of necessary interaction, a good thing in the class?

The list is merely indicative and not exhaustive. The individual teacher

or groups of teachers can reflect with questions of their choice to see if the classroom transactions do not align with the curricular intent.

Recommendations

From the standpoint of a hidden curriculum, classroom transactions take on a new meaning and call for a deeper teacher introspection and reflection that can help them see if there may be problems they had not envisaged with the curricular transactions. These ideas also hold value for teacher educators because they are invested in helping other teachers become better professionals. Teacher educators need to reflect on how to raise awareness about the hidden curriculum among teachers and help them become more sensitive to the harm they may be causing to their students.

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