

Tribal Folklore as ELT Material for First-Generation Learners

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ABSTRACT

An important component of any ELT programme is the content. A course-book ensures that the required course content is presented in a uniform format for ready implementation. In most cases where English is taught as the second or foreign language, a course-book is 'the only point of contact with the language' for learners. Available research has established that appropriate language content motivates learners to acquire language skills. In the eastern Indian state of Odisha, that has a high tribal population, a government sponsored scheme named *Anwasha* exists, which aims at providing quality English medium education to underprivileged rural tribal children, in urban public schools. But it is widely observed that these first-generation tribal learners in the English Medium Instruction (EMI) system are being deprived of the desired results. Finding no motivation to study a foreign language with unfamiliar content, and facing unfair competition from city-bred privileged learners, many of them drop out midway. Tribal communities in India have a rich tradition of folklore but it has by and large remained oral and no serious attempts have been made to use it as material for ELT. A pilot-project with ELT material drawn from the local tribal-folklore, aimed at providing familiar course content, was conducted to encourage students to learn better. Improvements in compliance of the assigned classroom tasks were noticed and the familiar content did bring in an element of enthusiasm among the young learners. It is believed that the findings of this study will be helpful in contextualising ELT course content using materials from learners' own folklore.

INTRODUCTION

Internet and globalisation have today led to a situation where English is assured of its place as the most sought-after language the world over. In the last two decades in India people have shown unprecedented interest in learning English, which has created a truly emerging trend in favour of English language learning. Today in India, English is not seen just as a language but as a path for upward social mobility and economic betterment. It is perceived as a 'powerful agent for social change.' People both in urban and rural areas consider it as a language of power and opportunities. Despite agitations by mother-tongue education advocates, English language education is gaining in prominence with each passing day in today's globalised context. It is one of the "most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 81).

Documenting the demand and importance of English language in India while preparing the National Curriculum Framework (2005), the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), has stated that, "English in India today is a symbol of people's aspiration for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life... The level of introduction of English has now become a matter of political response to people's aspirations,

rendering almost irrelevant an academic debate on the merits of a very early introduction." In its report, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) (2009) has stated that "the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. Early action in this sphere would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society."

The emergence of English as the most prominent International language has necessitated rapid changes in ELT policies in non-Anglophone countries or countries where the first language of the majority of the population is not English. In India, the last two decades have seen a definite shift in English from being taught as a foreign language (EFL) to English being the medium of instruction (EMI) (Dearden, 2014). More and more parents across India are forsaking educating their kids in their mother tongue in favour of English. Though there have been warnings from educationists suggesting that cognitive development of a child is adversely affected by early schooling in an unfamiliar language, "there has been an exponential increase during the last decade in English-medium schools in the country" (The Guardian, May 15, 2012).

Available data compiled from the District Information System for Education (DISE) by the National University of Education Planning and Administration, (NUEPA) which

functions under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, suggests that in the period between 2008-09 and 2013-14, while overall enrolment in schools went up by just 7.5% and enrolment in Hindi-medium schools went up by about 25%, enrolment in English-medium schools almost doubled in the same period (The Times of India, September 28, 2015). In September 2017 a panel of South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) in the National Capital Region (NCR) proposed to impart English-medium education in its schools, from nursery and onwards, as it felt that the move was necessary to counter competition from the Delhi government schools. The panel further suggested that all SDMC schools should be allowed to have one English-medium section in the school and has asked the schools which at present do not having provision for it to start English medium from nursery and one English section from Class-I, from the academic session 2018-19 (NDTV, September 12, 2017).

Though there is a huge body of research that has established the advantages of education in mother-tongue at the primary level, yet English medium education is still preferred by the economically and socially disadvantaged sections of the society as they see it as a potential weapon in their battle against the upper and dominant castes (Annamalai, 2004). The tribal communities of the country are no different. They also perceive it as potential weapon in their perennial struggle for attention and equality. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities constitute 8.6% (Census of India, 2011) of the population of India but unfortunately have historically been economically and educationally marginalised sections of the society. Census of India 2011 mentions that the literacy rate of people classified under STs in India stands at 58.96% as against the national average of 72.99%. It further states that as against the national average of 79.4% only 66.6% of the ST children who get enrolled in class I, complete education up to class V and by the time they complete education up to class VIII, it drops down to 41.9 % as against the national average of 63.9 %. Further, as against the national average of 49.3% only 26.7% of the ST children who get enrolled in class I complete school education up to class X.

In India, the performance of the students in the examination that they take after ten years of formal schooling is taken as the benchmark of academic achievement. Available data indicate that the percentage of ST students who pass the high school examinations in different states in India is about 40 on the average, which is significantly less than that of the other social sub-groups. Census of India 2011 data shows that the state of Odisha is home to 62 distinct tribal communities each having their own language and culture. Odisha ranks third in India in terms of the numerical population of the tribals, and they constitute 22.85 % of the total population of the state. Tribal communities have their distinct culture and each sub-group has its own language that is different from even the dominant local language. Sometimes for the tribal children even the state language is also an alien language. Yet at the same time, just like their counterparts from non-tribal communities, tribal students also aspire for quality English Medium Education (EMI) with the hope that someday it will give them a better livelihood. But EMI for

tribals has always been a matter of debate, and the common perception regarding its introduction is that it is more a political decision rather than an academic one.

In Odisha, a state government sponsored residential education scheme named *Anwasha* (quest) exists, which aims at providing quality education to Below Poverty Line (BPL) ST children from rural areas, in English medium schools located in urban areas. Tribal children aged 6-7 from rural areas are provided residential facilities, in addition to all other provisions for studies by the state, to take admission in class I, in English medium public schools in towns and cities. These children without any formal schooling in their villages are directly given admission in class I in some select English medium schools, and the state government takes care of all their expenses starting from board, lodging, medical expenses, to school fees, books and uniforms.

The scheme was initiated in July 2015, and in the background of such a unique scheme being implemented for the very first time for tribal children of the country, an independent academic study was considered imperative not only to study the ground situation but also to generate baseline data for further studies. A diagnostic test designed on the lines of A1 level test of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CERF), with items selected as per the guidelines for progression till class I, provided in Learning Indicators and Learning Outcomes at the Elementary Stage, published by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2014) was conducted by the authors among the beneficiaries of the said scheme in December 2016. The results revealed that a majority of the students could not achieve the desired results and performed poorly in all the four basic language skills. Eighty percent of the respondents could not speak a single sentence about themselves in English, while only 36% of the respondents could recite an English rhyme. Only 11% of the students could read a simple passage fluently, 56 % could read haltingly, while 33% of the respondents could not read at all. Thirty-one percent of the respondents could answer questions after reading a simple passage, and 40% of the respondents could follow and act upon simple instructions. A similar test conducted among non-beneficiaries yielded much better results on all the four language parameters.

During focus-group meetings with teachers of some designated schools dealing with the beneficiaries of the scheme, the teachers were unanimous in their view that the motivational levels of the students had really reduced in comparison to their motivational levels when they had first joined the schools two years ago. Unfair competition from city-bred privileged learners, and unfamiliar content in their English text books were found to be the two major factors for the drop in the motivational levels of the children. To address the problems relating to unfamiliar content, the prescribed texts for English were analysed to find out if the contents were influencing factors in the students' quest for better English language learning. In the course of the analysis it was found out that the material being used for ELT was also 'foreign' as it was not only of a higher standard for these first-generation learners under EMI, but also completely unfamiliar, and something that the beneficiaries were not able to relate to. It

was thus observed that the student beneficiaries were lacking in motivation primarily because they were being taught a 'foreign' language with content that was also 'foreign' for them. Our interaction with the wardens of the hostels also brought to light the fact that there had been quite a high percentage of dropouts from the scheme during the last two years since the programme had been initiated. Thus, one of the major reasons why these first-time tribal learners of English, who are also first-generation learners under the EMI system, are being deprived of any desired result is because of faulty course-books that have no link whatsoever with the background of these children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most widely used educational aid in any ELT classroom and the most critical component of any language learning programme is the course-book. A course-book provides useful readymade content to not only the students but also to the teachers. A course book ensures that the required course content is presented in a uniform format for ready implementation. In most cases where English is taught as the second language or foreign language, a course book is the only point of contact with the language for a learner (Spyropoulou, 2017). Course books are printed in bulk and are aimed at meeting the needs of global markets and usually fail to respond to local needs (Gray, 2002). Most of the course-books present a much 'centred' perspective of the language (Penycook, 1994; Phillipson, 2009) where neither the authors' nor the publishers' selection of the content is not objected and their beliefs about the language remain unchallenged. It has been well established by research in the field of material development for ELT that use of culture-specific and locally available resources to teach a second language is more effective than subjecting the learners to content with which they would not be able to relate to. The importance of content in developing linguistic abilities is getting wider acceptance in recent times (Peachey, 2004).

Cunningsworth (1995) is of the opinion that "no course-book designed for the general market will be absolutely ideal for your particular group of learners". He recommends some specific points:

- a. A textbook should correspond to learners' needs and should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning programme.
- b. A textbook should take into account the needs of learners and facilitate their learning processes, without imposing a rigid method.
- c. A textbook should be a support material and should fulfil the role of scaffolding. A text book should ideally be an effective link between the target language and the learner.

While it is true that no textbook or set of materials can be termed perfect (McGrath, 2002), course-books are usually planned to be applicable to multiple number of students, teachers and contexts. Teachers sometimes feel that the prescribed course-books are unsuitable for their particular class. It has often been found that the content or examples used in the prescribed course-books may not be relevant or ap-

propriate to the group and they may not reflect the students' needs since textbooks are often written for global markets and many a time do not reflect the interests and needs of students (Graves, 2000; Basturkmen, 2010).

Readymade course-material in the form of textbooks in a way absolves the teacher of a major responsibility - selection of content that is appropriate. Instead of developing content with reference to contextual familiarity of the learners, and participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it, teachers tend to just sit back and operate the system. More often than not classroom teachers are secure in the belief that textbook authors are competent educationists, who know more than them about pedagogy and educational methodology (Hutchinson & Torres 1994).

Available research establishes that the achievements of tribal students are lower than that of non-tribal students in primary levels. Shukla (1994) points out that the key factors that contribute to the low academic achievement among tribal children are curriculum and medium of instruction. Mohanty (2017) suggests that parents and more importantly teachers should understand that the child's mother tongue is extremely important for academic success. Delpit (1988) has underlined various issues of power that come into play in classrooms. With reference to material he points out that "The power of the publishers of textbooks and of the developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world" has an impact on the morale and motivation of the learners. The text books prescribed for the beneficiaries of *Anwasha* lack content that they can identify with. Not only are children exposed to a 'foreign' language but also the content and context of the curriculum is seen as 'foreign'. It would be worthwhile to mention here that all the prescribed textbooks were published much before the *Anwasha* scheme came into force. It clearly suggests that there has been no attempt by anyone to prepare an ELT text book that would be appropriate for the beneficiaries of this scheme. Studies conducted among tribal students of Kerala by Ahammed (2012) have revealed that learning English is perceived to be a difficult task by a number of students because they can neither relate to the context nor to the content of their text books. Lack of 'tribal content' in the curriculum translates into a kind of projection of inferiority of 'tribal identity'. Mahanand and Goswami (2011) speak of using folklore as content for ELT to teach English to rural children. In a review of the same book, Kabir (2011) emphasised the need for culture-specific and locally-anchored materials, especially for pupils in non-privileged and marginalized learning environments in rural India.

Another important factor that was considered in the course of the study was the motivational levels of the students in the classroom. Various studies have concluded that motivating students in the EFL classroom is a complex task involving a multiplicity of psycho-sociological and linguistic factors (Dornyei, 2001). Motivation is considered to be of paramount importance in the teaching-learning process. Motivation has been defined in many ways, but in this paper it is simply used by the authors to refer to the desire of students to actively participate in the teaching-learning process (Brown, 2002; Lewis, 2002).

There have been various studies on the use of folklore as ELT material but no serious attempts have been made to utilize the rich tribal folklore as material for ELT. Bean (1999) is of the view that one of the most striking features of folktales is the universality or similarity of the sequence of events in those tales and this makes these tales “one of the most accessible vehicles for language learning” (p. 58).

According to Taylor (2000) folktales being mainly a part of the oral traditions, have simple language structures. For English language teaching, tales from any culture translated into English can be effectively used to introduce simple grammatical features, such as simple past and present tenses, and coordinating connectors like “and” and “but.” Another important feature of folktales is the use of familiar themes of honesty, kindness, jealousy, greed or other moral issues that motivate learners to listen or read with confidence (Taylor, 2000).

In the light of the various recommendations relating to ELT material development regarding using folklore as content in ELT classrooms, the present study has been taken up. It is perceived that introducing tribal-folklore as content for ELT would bring in the element of thematic familiarity for the first-generation tribal learners under the EMI system and motivate them to study a new language. Therefore, English lessons drawn from local tribal-folklore aimed at providing familiar course content is being proposed as a pilot project to get the students motivated and interested in the learning process, thus preventing high dropout rate. Folk-stories narrating the tribal worldview form the basis of the teaching-learning material that is designed for these students.

It is believed that familiarity with the content would provide the learners more cognitive space, which in turn could be effectively used by the teacher to stress on the structure and features of English language and facilitate better understanding of grammatical patterns of English (Taylor, 2000).

The idea of introducing tribal-folklore in ELT for first-generation tribal learners of English under the EMI system is consistent with the available research in the field of ELT in postmodern era. There was a time when only the ‘native speakers’ were considered to be the sole owners of the English language and the commonly accepted benchmark for English language proficiency was the ability to acquire ‘native-like’ pronunciation in English. Researchers like Swales (1993), Walker, (2001) and Widdowson, (2003) have argued that there is no longer any particular distinction between the native and non-native speakers of English. English does not belong only to the native speakers but to all those who use it. A relatively recent term that is gaining prominence in ELT is post-method pedagogy. Kumaravadivelu (2008) conceptualised post-method pedagogy as a three-dimensional system. It comprises three pedagogic parameters namely; particularity, practicality, and possibility. He explains that in ELT, each parameter not only shapes but is also shaped by the other two. Though he agrees that the three parameters interweave and interact with each other in a synergic relationship, yet the most important aspect of post-method pedagogy is its particularity which means pedagogy “must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of

learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu”.

Research Questions

Taking into account the given research background some of the questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. Are the prescribed texts a hindrance to learning for the beneficiaries of *Anwasha* scheme?
2. Can tribal folklore be used as teaching material for these beneficiaries?
3. Will there be any change in the learning achievements of students if folklore is used as study material?
4. Can the use of folklore as study material bring about any change in the motivational levels of the beneficiaries?

The Present Study

Thirty-eight beneficiaries, who are presently in class III, (aged between 8 and 10 years) were personally interviewed by the authors during November-December 2017. These children were admitted in class I in July 2015 and had completed two years of English language learning. Keeping in mind the age of the subjects and their sensibilities and also considering the sensitivity of some of the questions, the interview was designed to be informal and views were obtained in the course of general conversations with the students. In few cases the subjects were hesitant and not very forthcoming in expressing any opinion. No attempt was made by the interviewers to force out an opinion.

1. The students were asked if they liked to learn English. Twenty-six students responded in the affirmative and eight replied in the negative, while four students did not respond. What is worth noting is that these same students had overwhelmingly responded in the affirmative to the same question two years back when they were first admitted in class I. This information was elicited from the school teachers who had first interacted with the students when they had joined their classes in 2015. This clearly shows that in just two years the young students have lost enthusiasm for learning, and it could possibly lead to further loss of motivation. If corrective steps are not taken some of these students would eventually drop out before completing their schooling.
2. The students were then asked if they enjoyed their English classes. Eighteen students claimed that they enjoyed their classes, while 6 replied in the negative and 14 students did not respond. It is worth noting that only less than half of the students interviewed claimed that they enjoyed their classes. This can be taken as a wake-up call for not only the teachers but also the administrators to take corrective measures in time.
3. The students were then asked if they liked the stories/poems that were there in their prescribed text books. Nine students claimed that they liked the stories/poems from their text books, 21 replied in the negative while 8 students chose not to express any opinion. The strong negative opinion by the students is an indication that the

students are not able to relate to the material being used for ELT. This substantiates the notion that there is a need for alternative course material that would appeal to all the beneficiaries of this scheme.

4. The students were asked if they liked the stories told by their grandparents or elderly people at home. This question was asked as the authors wanted to ascertain the views of the students regarding folklore. Thirty-three students replied in the affirmative and only two replied in the negative while three students gave no response at all.
5. The students were then asked if they would like stories told by their grandparents to be used in English as course material instead of the current stories of their text books. All the students overwhelmingly replied in the affirmative.

Using Tribal-Folklore as Material for ELT

Karma Parab is one of the important festivals celebrated by tribal communities in the state of Odisha. It is an integral part of the tribal culture and folklore, and the children are all familiar with the festivities and rituals associated with this festival. A part of a local story about *Karma Festival* was selected as material for study. The translation and the lesson plan for the same were developed by the authors. While designing the lesson plan it was decided not to disturb the methods being currently followed for their prescribed course. Out of the few schools participating in the said scheme one school was selected randomly for the classroom experiment. The teachers readily agreed to be a part of the experiment. The lesson was taught by their regular English teacher. The children were told a day before that they would be taught a lesson in English about their own festival - *Karma Parab* in their next class.

The teacher reported that she could perceive that the students seemed more than eager to study on that particular day. She could feel that there were more smiles on their faces and they responded to their roll calls with greater enthusiasm on that day.

Following is a sample folk-story with exercises that was used for classroom teaching in one of the designated schools participating in the *Anwasha* scheme:

Material Used

'Parab' means a festival. We celebrate many festivals. 'Karma Parab' is an important festival of the tribals. During this festival trees are worshipped. The tree that is worshipped is known as the 'Karma tree'. The priest cuts a branch of the 'Karma tree' with his axe and brings the branch to the village. The branch is planted at a field in the village. All the people of the village worship the branch. People visit the place carrying pots of water and pray before the tree.

This festival tells us about the value of trees and water in our life. Trees are our friends and we must save them.

We must plant more trees. We must save water also.

As a pre-lesson activity a discussion was conducted about festivals and the children were asked to tell about

the festivals that are celebrated by them at home. Children mentioned about the festivals that they celebrated at home and in their community. They spoke about popular pan-Indian festivals like *Diwali, Holi, Dussehera, and Christmas*, and also distinct tribal festivals like *Karma parab, Sahrul parab, Ind parab* and *Mage Parab*. It is worth noting that the students who were not even ready to open their mouths in the class were ready to talk freely about their distinct tribal festivals. This aspect of the teaching-learning process could be a motivating factor that could enhance learning. These responses are an indication that following familiar content can be helpful in building students' confidence and self-esteem.

The teacher reported that when she presented a model reading of the chapter, the attention levels of the students were higher than what she normally found. When the teacher called for volunteers to read the passage aloud for the class, almost the entire class was ready to read. The teacher mentioned that normally she had to force students to read aloud for the class but for this chapter the students were more than willing to perform the task.

In the vocabulary section the teacher discussed the following words

1. *Festival: a special day or period observe a religious activity*
2. *Celebrate: to observe and take part in a religious activity with joy*
3. *Worship: to pray*
4. *Priest: The person who prays for us or guides us during our prayers*
5. *Field: An open place*
6. *Value: Importance*

The teacher then discussed the following questions

1. *What do you mean by 'Parab'?*
2. *What is worshipped during 'Karma Parab'?*
3. *Who cuts a branch of the 'Karma' tree?*
4. *Where is the branch planted?*
5. *What does this festival tell us?*

The children were given a worksheet to complete as homework. Improvement in compliance of the assigned task was noticed. The teacher regularly dealing with the students revealed that out of the group of 38 students around 20 students completed their work regularly. For this task, 33 students completed the assigned task and submitted on time. The higher compliance level can directly be attributed to the teaching material which was taken from a familiar content and context. Though there was no noticeable change in the mistakes made by children, yet it can be concluded that the use of familiar material did bring in an element of enthusiasm among the students. It brought about a perceptible change in the motivational levels of the learners. The level of attention in the class by the students was markedly better. The use of familiar material led to a situation where the children were no longer shy of accepting their tribal identity; rather they seemed to be proud of it and identified with it. The teacher as well as the students agreed that their increased interest level and enthusiasm was primarily because the materials used in class were something that the students could relate to. This increased enthusiasm was leveraged by the teacher to set ad-

ditional ELT tasks for the students and the students happily completed these tasks.

Limitations of the Study

1. This study is limited to studies conducted at one school.
2. Currently there is a dearth of English translations of rich tribal-folklore which can be used as material for ELT.
3. Even where English translations of tribal-folklore are available those need to be properly adapted for classroom requirements.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Clear-cut curricular objectives and learning outcomes on the lines of those prescribed by NCERT should be designed exclusively for the beneficiaries of this scheme by the State Council of Educational Research and Training.
2. Course in ELT should be designed taking material from tribal-folklore so that while studying a foreign language, children at least get content that they are familiar with.
3. The need of the hour is to contextualize English learning for the students by using resources from the learners' own culture and language.
4. Teachers dealing with first-generation tribal learners under the EMI system, need to be involved in challenging their own beliefs about the content and they need to be encouraged to use tribal folklore.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that if the learners are offered familiar content it would help in developing their English language skills. The findings of this study are in agreement with the studies conducted by Floyd & Carrell (1987), Mahanand & Goswami (2011) and Mishra & Mahanand (2017), who have established that learning is positively affected by content schema, and that texts based on the own culture of the learners are easier to understand.

In the light of the findings of this study the authors believe that using tribal-folklore as material for ELT for the beneficiaries under *Anwasha* scheme would be very useful for the students. The results showed better motivational and attention levels among the students which could be interpreted as being similar to intrinsic motivation. The role of intrinsic motivation in learning in general and ELT in particular has been well established. Available research shows that intrinsic motivation leads to greater learning and achievement (Deci 1975; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students who are intrinsically motivated are usually more involved in learning and they use strategies to promote deeper understanding, and future application of that learning. Furthermore, it is well-established that learners, regardless of their age group, perform more creatively when they do a task that they find inherently interesting.

It is recommended that teachers dealing with tribal learners may start exploring the possibilities of including tribal folklore as material for teaching English. Schemata or ex-

isting knowledge of learners helps in better understanding, therefore, tales drawn from the students' native language and culture will be understood better and accepted by the learners than the stories without familiar content and context (Gunderson, 2009).

Various learning activities can be centred around folktales to develop not only English language skills but also critical thinking and creative thinking skills.

There are many tribal languages which do not have any literary traditions expect in oral forms, which are handed down from generation to generation. Using this rich indigenous oral literature as material for English language teaching would not only encourage learners from tribal communities to learn English but also offer an avenue for preservation and propagation of tribal-folklore as well.

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