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Factors Affecting English Language Acquisition of Socially Underprivileged Students in Higher Secondary Level

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Abstract

The present curriculum envisages the interaction between student and knowledge, the student should know how to create knowledge from his own environment which helps him to become a good citizen. English, being a language of information and technology and opportunities, helps the students in their academic pursuits and helps in earning their livelihood. The students are supposed to achieve certain aims/objectives of English at Higher Secondary Level. But tribal students cannot even read simple English or write simple words in English. So, the English teachers have to teach them the basics along with imparting the text set in the syllabus which makes teachers task difficult. There are many sociological, psychological, economic problems faced by them which affect their learning. It is teacher's primary responsibility to improve the slow learner's self-image and remove their anxiety about learning English.

Keywords: Underprivileged, Higher Secondary

Introduction

In Kerala, English is taught as one of the important subjects in higher secondary curriculum, but the students who belong to the marginalized section of the society which include SC/ST and Mukkuva often fail in English in the public exams. Several initiatives including special coaching in English to these students have been undertaken by the government of Kerala, still they cannot speak and write the language with intelligible accuracy. The paper is based on a pilot study conducted to understand the challenges encounter by SC/ST and Mukkuva students to learn English as a second language.

Full Paper

Kerala, the state with high literacy rate, has to face a serious problem – low literacy rate of SC/ST and Mukkuva people.

English is the most widely used language today and it is the language which swings in the cradle of many cultures of different countries, thereby it stores human experiences in different walks of life. It has become the language of opportunity and advancement.

The importance of acquiring the basic skills in learning English has increased significantly as English has been the de-facto standard. In order to make the learners ready for their careers that they seek and enter the work force communication skill in English will help them a lot.

Even after being exposed to the initiative by the government for helping them to learn English in a better way, they consider English as a hard nut to crack.

There are sociological, psychological and economic reasons for this.

The underprivileged students are confined to low status and are always remained in isolation instead of being absorbed into the mainstream. The parents of the students do not want to send the children to the school and the parents utilize them for monetary support to the family.

They feel alienated from other students in the inclusive system as their mothertongue is different from that of their peers in the school. Mukkuva students got their own distinctly different regional varieties of Malayalam which is not even comprehensible for their peers.

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The main barriers are lack of confidence, inability to understand the medium of instruction and mothertongue interference.

It is clear that there is a large population of tribes, scheduled caste people and Mukkuva live in India. They are marginalised. Education can bring about positive changes in them and can act as agent of transformation and help them to contribute for the development of our nation.

English is the language of opportunity and it will surely help the higher secondary students to equip themselves to reach new heights in their academic pursuit. If they are helped to learn the languages well by taking away the hindrances which do not allow them to acquire the language, they will have the feeling of self-reliance.

From my 10 years' experience in HSS level, I understood that the under privileged students could not attain the level of standard that they are supposed to achieve when they reach the higher secondary level.

Teachers do not understand their language and students who belong to the adolescent category, due to their self-consciousness hesitate to ask the doubts in connection with the text that they learn. Lack of encouragement or motivation from the English teacher also inhibits the process of their learning.

In the classroom, individual attention cannot be paid to them as there are 65 students in one class itself. So, these students cannot attain the four language skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing as the teacher cannot correct their mistakes by paying individual attention to them.

Acquisition of the four language skills is essential for the students to win mastery over the language and any language but the higher secondary students classroom environment do not provide linguistic programmes attuned to their interest or capability or enable them to participate actively according to their pace of learning.

Cultural estrangement also makes their learning of the language slower as their experience of learning L2 is entirely different from learning of their mother tongue.

The number of dropouts among them are increasing due to their fear of learning English. Lack of infrastructural facilities in the classrooms including audio visual aids are also the reasons for their reluctance to go to the school.

The home environment of these students does not encourage them to study English. The students have to go for odd jobs after their school time to support their parents. The students most often do not want to clarify their doubts regarding the language as they feel the teacher do not understand them.

Streaming of activities may help these students to learn English. Their levels of challenge may be varied. Giving the same activities based on simple learning items by keeping the time limit flexible will be helpful for them.

Teachers should help them to practice well how to pronounce sounds and words in English making use of language lab. Their natural instincts for dance and music can be made use of while engaging them in learning activities.

The learning activities planned by the teacher should include real life activities which the underprivileged students can relate with their lives too, in the form of role play, speech etc. which help them to appreciate the language better.

The newly introduced constructivist pedagogy of language

learning suggests that English language acquisition is similar to that of proficiency attained in the mothertongue. Noam Chomsky in his criticism of behaviourism stated that children must have inborn capacity of language acquisition. The current approach advocated in the curriculum is based on Chomsky's concept of innate language system. According to it the environmental factors contributes to the process of language learning.

School is a primary setting for any student to gain academic and social experience. School routines, teacher competency, peer attitude, and teaching and learning, teacher experience, strength of the class attendance cognitive encouragement will have an effect on their learning of English.

Adequate opportunities are not available in learning English through listening. Teachers read out the text and students passively listen. Speaking skill is neglected very much and the student cannot express himself by speaking to others.

Any language will get activated when people use it. The English teacher, due to constraints of time fail to make them practise the skill-oriented activities. She could not spend enough time to practise them with the four languages skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Government has implemented many initiatives to reduce the dropout rates and help them to learn the difficult language like English in the school. But still, they remain backward in learning English.

Tribal students are less exposed to script and reading. This causes difficulty as when they join the schools itself, they are compelled to practise scripts and reading.

They have to learn Hindi, Malayalam too and handling three languages at the school also causes difficulty to them and they lack interest to learn anything. The curriculum constructors must take into consider the factors affecting their learning of English language and plan the curriculum which should ensure the learners' active participation in the learning activities.

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