

Policy Imperatives for Ascertaining Inclusivity and Equity in ELT: An Experimental Study with Indigenous Learners in India

Hemendra Singh Chandalia

Abstract

This article explores the challenges and pedagogical implications of teaching English to indigenous learners in India, who comprise approximately 8.25 percent of the nation's population. Situated within socio-linguistic and cultural diversity, the study argues that English instruction for these communities is best understood through an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) framework rather than as English as a Second Language (ESL). Emphasising the role of English as a vehicle for social mobility and economic opportunity, the paper highlights the necessity of inclusive English Language Teaching (ELT) policies that account for learners' linguistic and cultural contexts. It critiques prevailing assumptions about Mother Tongue Interference and advocates for the integration of indigenous lexical and syntactic features within English teaching materials. The article proposes pedagogical strategies and text-based interventions aimed at bridging linguistic gaps while acknowledging the learners' native languages as valuable educational resources. These proposed pedagogical strategies aim to contribute to more equitable ELT practices that empower marginalized indigenous learners to use English effectively as a means of communication and participation in broader societal domains.

Keywords: *ELT, EFL, ESL, mother tongue interference, lexicon, glossary, indigenous.*

Introduction

India is a vast democracy characterized by immense demographic diversity, where indigenous communities constitute approximately 8.25 percent of the population and have traditionally remained geographically and culturally isolated in remote hilly areas, coastal regions, and desert stretches, maintaining distinct lifestyles away from urban centers. As a democratic nation, India is obligated to devise policies ensuring inclusive and equitable development for all population segments, particularly targeting the most backward and disadvantaged indigenous communities. For these learners, teaching English is more accurately approached as English as a Foreign

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Language (EFL) rather than English as a Second Language (ESL), making it essential to develop tailored approaches, methodologies, and materials based on their unique educational and cultural backgrounds.

English in today's India functions as a de facto national language and serves as a crucial tool for upward social mobility and economic advancement, yet indigenous learners face multilingual complexities as they must learn English through regional languages while maintaining their oral mother tongues. Most indigenous communities speak their own languages and require regional languages for external communication, creating a trilingual learning environment with distinct sentence structures, vocabulary, and sound patterns that necessitate specialized ELT pedagogy considering their cultural contexts. Since most learners from indigenous communities are first-generation learners not exposed to English in their homes, teachers rely heavily on regional languages as the medium of instruction, while textbooks become critical teaching tools due to severe deficiencies of trained English Language teachers in rural areas and hence the learners rely solely on the books.

An inclusive English Language Teaching (ELT) policy, therefore, must address not only syntax but also lexicon rooted in learners' mother tongues, incorporating the rich treasure of oral literature available through songs, narratives, sayings, and proverbs, while challenging prevailing prejudices against mother tongue use in ELT. The traditional notion of Mother Tongue Interference requires reassessment in the context of indigenous learners, as appropriately designed textbooks and methodology can significantly improve English language learning in such multilingual contexts where learners develop a unique linguistic blend of English, regional language, and their predominantly oral mother tongue

Methodology

The article is based on primary data collected while interacting with tribal learners in Southern Rajasthan in their classrooms, personal discussions and observation and on secondary data available in a doctoral research carried out in two villages of Jharkhand in the district of Singhbhum. The data collected in the doctoral study conducted in Jharkhand is drawn from an experimental study conducted in four schools of Sonua and Chakradharpur blocks while the primary data was collected through a study in Girwa and Sarada blocks of Udaipur district in the state of Rajasthan. The study in Jharkhand included an analysis of textbooks of standard VI, VII and VII prescribed by JCERT, interaction with teachers, conducting a pre-test preparation of a multilingual tool, teaching a unit each from textbooks of standard VI, VII and VIII using MTs and multilingual glossary and testing the performance through a post test. In Rajasthan a similar study was conducted analyzing the textbooks of the Board of Secondary Education, Government of Rajasthan of standard VIII, IX and X. The schedules were prepared both for students and the teachers and data was collected through participant observation method. The respondents included students of government schools and their teachers.

Cultural Context

Tribals in Rajasthan belong to 12 major tribes. However, in South Rajasthan the Bhils form the most dominant tribe. There are Bhil-Meenas, Saharias, Damor and Kathodi tribes also in the region. In Jharkhand the tribes include Ho, Santhal, Munda, Gond, Bhumij and Kudmi. S.L. Doshi and Narendra Vyas in their book *Tribal Rajasthan: Sunshine of the Aravali* (1992) describe the backwardness of these tribes. According to them the tribal people have remained steeped in illiteracy, poverty and backwardness for centuries. They have been victims of exploitation. Their scheduled status is due to their general backwardness, poverty and exploitation in the past. They have lived in the hills for centuries. Only recently, did they come to the plains in search of work and came in contact with non-tribal people.

Doshi and Vyas (1992) affirm that the tribal people are honest, simple and truthful. They have their own cultural identity. They are good at shooting arrows and hunting. They have great knowledge about medicinal plants. Faith therapy is also observed among them. The forest resources are a major source of livelihood for them. They are fun loving people and are fond of singing and dancing. On festivals and in fairs their mirth can be seen in their choicest clothes, songs, and dances. Tribal people mostly sing and dance in groups. They have a rich tradition of oral literature. Often the songs are packed up with repetitions and refrains; one line sung by one group is repeated by the other. Most of the tribal families are engaged in marginal agriculture and daily wage labour. The children too work on the farms and on daily wages to support their families. Their access to education is very limited and there are a big percentage of dropouts. The access to higher education is very limited. Only those children who belong to families which are comparatively well off get access to higher education.

Is English Language an ESL or EFL?

In India English is now treated as a second language and the pedagogy used for teaching English is also chosen accordingly. But things are a bit different for tribal learners. English is twice removed from them. The mother tongue of tribal students in South Rajasthan is Bhili, a dialect close to the Vagary dialect spoken by people in southern Rajasthan. But Bhili is not the medium of instruction. Hindi is the language used for all official matters. The English teachers teaching tribal people tend to use Hindi as an intermediary. So is the case in Jharkhand where there are multiple languages used by different tribal communities as their mother tongue. They include Ho, Kudmali, Bhumij, Odiya and Santhali. Here also none of the mother tongues are used as medium of instruction. Hindi is used as medium of instruction (MI). Thus, the students have to shift to Hindi from their L1 in order to comprehend all subjects. In the case of English, they have to be routed through Hindi and not their L1 to understand the notions, concepts and meaning of words. In the study conducted in Jharkhand it was found that the students of Middle School Madangahir, Middle School Sonua and Middle School Dukri, Gunja belonged to different communities and hence their mother tongues were also different. In the total sample of 478 students only 2 reported Hindi as their mother Tongue (MT). The students reported that Bhumij,

Gondhi, Ho, Kudmali, Mahali, Mundari, Santhali, Odiya, Bengali and Hindi as their mother tongues. Similarly, in Southern

Rajasthan the mother tongue of the learners in the schools of Girwa and Sarada blocks is Wagdi, Mewari and Bhili. None of the students reported Hindi as their mother tongue (MT). The new education policy 2020 lays stress on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction but the Rajasthani language and its dialects have not been recognized in the eight schedules of the constitution of India as the language of the Union of India. Hence the strategy and methodology need to be suited according to their requirements. While devising the ELT curriculum one has to be conscious of the cultural pluralism, mutual respect, tolerance and obligatory reciprocity. In the experimental studies carried out it has been found that the use of multi lingual textbooks have resulted in an average growth of 45.6% in the learning of the target language.

Need of Accommodation and Convergence

Teaching English to the tribal learners should not impinge upon their cultural identity. The aim of teaching English should not be acculturation. Rather it should be redefined as accommodation and convergence. This change will have certain inevitable pedagogical implications. Jurgen Beneke talks about some of the ways English Language Teaching should be planned for the tribal learners:

The second step is rigorous scanning of existing teaching materials as to the ethnocentricity in content and linguistic features. For those professionally concerned with the teaching of English as a second language among the questions to be asked are: Does the material invite the learner's identification? Does it show consideration of the use of the language by non-natives or does not expect them to take over roles alien to them? Are the paralinguistic aspects of the materials culturally neutral or cultural specific? Since communicative competence is not possible and „mere“ linguistic competence that is envisaged. (Jurgen Beneke, as quoted in Bhatnagar, 2011, p.19)

The Postcolonial approach to ELT also advocates the use of the local, the individual and the singular experience. It emphasizes the need for localizing the content and methodology in accordance with native social and cultural environments of the learners. This is more relevant in the case of Tribal learners. The tribal culture is nature oriented and relies immensely on the resources available in the surroundings of their habitat. The languages they use are mostly oral without a distinct script of their own. Similarly, their literature also exists in the form of oral narratives, songs, dance-dramas, proverbs and sayings. They are fun-loving people who rejoice in melody and the beat of drums that accompany the synchronized steps of their dances. Dr. H. M. Kothari and Rekha Ranawat in their unpublished report of the UGC project titled *Ethno-methodological Analysis of language Barriers Among: The Tribal Students* talk of the cultural characteristics and recommend:

Tribal people are basically fun-loving people who believe in collaboration. The element of fun must be well ingrained in the learning system to make learning a joyful process rather than a pain. Traditional somber effect must be avoided. The glass must provide them an opportunity to have a hearty laugh. Ripples of laughter must be allowed to come out of the class and make the atmosphere joyful. The teachers must avoid pulling a long serious face. He should have a cheerful and approachable appearance. (Kothari, & Ranawat, 2017, p. 80)

Prof. Prashant Mishra and Susanta Kumar Bardhan, in their article “Localizing English Language Teaching in India: Issues, Challenges and Strategies” talk about the importance of localizing English Language teaching in Indian class rooms. They argue that the content used for teaching English in the rural areas need to be different from the one used to teaching English in the urban areas:

Localization implies contextualization of ELT in correspondence with the local socio-cultural settings of the diverse regions. Even in India, ELT situation differs from one region to another. ELT scenario in Urban English medium schools is different from the rural Hindi or regional language medium schools. The upbringing and the socio-cultural environment in urban regions differ from the rural regions. Therefore the content used for ELT to urban students should be different from the rural students. The content selected for teaching English to the ruralites should be localized by relating it to rural setting, rural culture, rural occupations and situations. (Mishra & Bardhan, 2011, p. 193)

Tribals of south Rajasthan have a rich reservoir of folk songs, tales, dance-dramas and other forms of narratives available in the oral form. Orality is a common feature of the literatures of all indigenous peoples across the world. There is a famous dance-drama called Gavari which is performed for forty days beginning the day next to the festival of Raksha- Bandhan. It has a central plot of the genesis of the Universe and the final blow to the nature which causes deluge. There are numerous sub-plots which relate to mythology and others which relate to the more real world of practical day to day life. In the songs popularly sung are the songs of resurgence and protest against the colonial rulers as well as the feudal lords. These narratives and songs translated into English can form the contents of texts which can be used to teach English to the tribal learners. Here are a few illustrations:

A. A Love Song-

Filled to the brim is the pond, Lilwani

Come by marrying me to my country, Lilwani

My country is lush green, Lilwani

Due to Mahi Dam in my country, Lilwani

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Wheat and Gram are sown, Lilwani
Gardens and Orchards are there Lilwani
Big rivers there are in my country, Lilwani
Big temples are also there Lilwani
Regal deities are there in my country, Lilwani
Trees of Mahua and Mango abundantly grow
In my country, Lilwani.(Dabi, 2009, p. 88)

The song is a description of the Vagad region, its topography, people and the rural life. There is a sense of pride in the rich natural splendor of the locale. The repetition of the refrain is a typical feature of the tribal songs. The song can be used to teach vocabulary, reading comprehension and can also be used as an illustration of descriptive writing to teach composition.

B. A Patriotic Song

Mangarh is our shrine, Beneshwar our temples
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
Beneshwar our temples, at Pawagarh our deities
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
Pawagarh our deities, at Banswara our bands
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
Banswara our bands, at Udaipur our talks
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
At Ahmedabad our meeting, at Bamania our speech
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
At Banswara our speech, at Jaipur our power
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield
At Jaipur is our power, at Delhi is our seat
Britishers go away, we“ll not yield, we will not yield. (Dabi, 2009, p. 86)

The song shows the spirit of defiance and protest against the British whom the tribals call “Bhuretia” in condemnation meaning thereby “Of Brownish Complexion”. In these lines of the song they state that from Mangarh to Delhi is their own nation which they describe as their seat and ask the British to go away. In every couplet they reiterate their determination to oust the colonial powers and also their strong will not to yield. Such verses would definitely be more

meaningful in the local context than a “Daffodils” or a “Grecian Urn”.

Anand Mahanand, in his article “The World of Oral Poetry: Songs of the Bhils” discusses the literary value of the Bhil songs:

Tribal songs are in oral form. They are transmitted from generation to generationLike any other song these songs are also meant for singing. For this reason, the chorus is repeated after each stanza. This also adds to the musical quality of the songs. The Bhil songs are full of images and

metaphors usually drawn from nature and from the Bhil Cultural milieu. Symbols like bow, arrow, plough, trees, stream, leaves, flowers, fruits are abundant in number.

Thus, the Bhil songs are not only significant from a sociological point of view i.e. they tell stories not only about Bhil life and culture but they also have literary value. (Mahanand, 2002, p. 29)

The research carried out in Jharkhand points at another serious problem. In this research work the textbooks designed by Jharkhand Academic Council are analyzed. The researcher finds out that the text books are age-appropriate and a good combination of prose and poetry. But the learners are unable to attain the basic proficiency in language for effective communication and development of language skills for knowledge acquisition. The researcher remarks that “The monolingual orientation of the textbook deters it from being self-sufficient as the students in the absence of an English subject teacher in the schools of Rural Jharkhand, as more than 70% of the posts for TGT English remain vacant in Jharkhand, are in no position to decipher the content on their own. It makes the entire exercise carried out by the textbook development team futile for the lack of self –sufficiency. And thereby, the aim of „attainment of basic proficiency „, remains un achieved.” (Mahto, 2023, p. 95)

The researcher finds that the glossary at the end of different lessons provides meaning of words in English. This does not help in any way the comprehension of the text. It is also observed that the meanings given are higher in difficulty level than the original word. For example, the meaning of the word “repair” is given as “mend”. This should be the other way around since “mend” is less familiar than the word “repair”. The researcher proposed to provide the glossary in the mother tongues of the learners prevalent in the region namely Ho, Kudmali, Santhali and Hindi. The experimental study reveals that this makes comprehension many times easier. So, the selection of text and the provision of glossary in mother tongue in English Language textbooks could be adopted as means of improving the proficiency of learners.

Teaching Spoken English

The study shows that there are numerous sounds in English with which the tribal learners are not familiar. Similarly, some sounds which are common in the tribal languages are not available in

English. Thus, there is a tendency to substitute one sound with another. Here are a few illustrations:

A. Substitution of sound / s / with the sounds / tʃ/ and / h /

In South Rajasthan the tribals sometimes substitute the sound / s / by / tʃ / and sometimes with the sound / h /. This is a regional characteristic. It is not the case that they do not have the sound / h /. In fact the substitution is a part of the linguistic behavior of the people which has grown over the years while speaking the “Deshaj” or the

“Tadbhav” words in their daily parlance. A little awareness, consciousness in use and a bit of drill can make them overcome this habit. Similarly, in Jharkhand /ʃ/ is substituted by /s/.

B. Substitution of the diphthong /ei/ with monothongs / e / or / æ /

Since the tribal learners are not very well aware of the glide, there is a tendency to substitute the sound / ei / with the more convenient and conventional sound / e / or / æ /. This is applicable to the non-tribal speakers of English in the region also.

C. Substitution of fricative /f/ with plosive / ph /

The speakers of the tribal and rural region of South Rajasthan are more accustomed to speaking the plosive / ph / as is available in their dialects and in Hindi, the language of official communication. Though the fricative / f / is also available in their speech but because of habitual use, the practice of using the same sound in English also continues.

D. Use of unnecessary pauses

In most of the first-generation learners that are found in the rural and tribal regions of south Rajasthan there is a tendency to give a pause intermittently without considering the punctuation marks. This problem is common to most of the learners of rural areas as they are not aware of the concept of tone group and intonation. This makes the speech fractured and uneven. In order to ascertain the fluency, the learners need to be made aware of the essentials of phonetics and punctuation. More than any theoretical lessons they need to be given sufficient amount of drill in connected speech besides in speaking isolated sounds and expressions. In schools loud reading in the presence of a teacher in a manageable size class with timely corrections in between by the teacher may be of some help.

E. Unawareness of stress

Most of the tribal learners in South Rajasthan are first generation learners. They negotiate their journey through the official language of the Union of India i.e. Hindi. Since Hindi does not observe any stress pattern, these learners of English are unable to exercise proper stress at the right places.

Semantic Ambiguities

The tribal languages have their rich vocabulary, idioms and phrases to express the varied experiences, emotions and ideas. As they attempt to switch over the code to English, at times. They tend to use the translations of their own linguistic resources drawn from their language or the intermediary language to find the equivalents. This results in some semantic ambiguities which can be removed by making them acquainted with idiomatic expressions in English which are comparable to the ones available in their own language.

In fact, we need to adopt a bilingual approach to teaching English which will save the learners from the fear of the unfamiliar and help them overcome their hesitation in the use of English. This approach is in conformity with the New Education Policy 2020 of the government of India which lays emphasis on the indigenous knowledge systems. Further it will help in the revision of text books on the basis of local needs of the learners. The teachers teaching in difficult circumstances will heave a sigh of relief as they would find it easier to dwell in a more familiar linguistic environment.

The Author:

Dr. Hemendra Singh Chandalia is a formerly Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Janardan Rai Nagar Rajasthan Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be A University), Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

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