

Problems of Teaching English at the Collegiate Level in the Tribal Areas of Gujarat

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Abstract

Teaching of English language is a challenge for the teachers in tribal areas. The reason is that the students who pass out the higher secondary examinations with or without English come to colleges with very little or perhaps no background of English. Though they learn the tenses, verb forms, articles, degrees, passive constructions etc as a part of their syllabi, they have very poor knowledge of English. We have been concerned with downward trend noticeable in standards of English in Gujarat and the time has come for us to act. We need to do this to help Gujarat progress raise its standards in English. One of the basic requirements of an educational institution specifically created to serve the needs of the young learners from a tribal belt in any state is that higher education provided to them be geared to fulfil the need of making them self-sufficient and self-reliant. It must enable them to find gainful employment when they pass out of the portals of such institutions. Some of these issues relate to (1) The rationale behind teaching English at the collegiate level to the young learners in the tribal areas of Gujarat, (2) The problems teachers and learners face in teaching-learning process at the collegiate level in such areas in Gujarat, (3) The need to take a re-look at the aim, objectives, content, materials and testing procedures used in teaching and testing given the level and the demographic profile, (4) The need to design strategies to tackle the problems of teaching English at the collegiate level in the tribal areas of Gujarat.

Key Words

English Language Teaching, Tribal Areas of Gujarat, Colligate Level Problems.

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Introduction

Ādivāsī or *vanbandhū* are the Gujarati equivalents for the English word *tribal*. The Government of Gujarat prefers to use the term *vanbandhū* to address them and announce the schemes for them. Etymologically, the Gujarati word *ādivāsī* is constituted out of twin roots '*ādi*' meaning 'ancient' and '*vāsī*' an 'inhabitant', giving us its original meaning. *Ādivāsīs*, who are believed to be the original inhabitants of a particular geographical area, are categorized as a minority of the population in our state and the country.

Our founding fathers enshrined in our Constitution specific provisions aimed at the protection and betterment of the Scheduled Tribes. Article 46 enjoins upon the state an obligation to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people in general and of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in particular, to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Article 335 provides for due consideration to be given to the claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in appointments to services and posts in the administrative set-up of the Union or of a State consistent with the maintenance of the efficiency of administration.

Irrespective of what we may have to say on this, research confirms that formal education has failed to make much impact on the tribals, the facility of reservations and scholarships notwithstanding. The main culprit here could be lack of guidance and cooperation, which prevents them from discharging their social obligations properly. Tribals prefer to have their children around to help them add to the family income. Moreover, there are very few educational institutions available in the interior and remote areas they inhabit and even these do not have many good teachers because good teachers are unwilling to render their services in educational institutions existing or coming up in such far-flung undeveloped areas. Hence, tribal children are required to travel to far off places for education. One of the difficulties they face in sending their children up for higher education is their own limited income. There are many parents, who cannot afford to do so even if they wanted. Another major deterrent is the fear of the children breaking away from their cultural roots, which prevents even those who can afford from doing so.

No nation-state can afford to keep its aboriginal ethnic groups backward educationally simply because they constitute a minority of its population. We have reasons to be happy that we, as a nation, have not kept our aboriginal compatriots educationally backward. For, we have in place laws that make it mandatory for institutions of higher learning to implement a certain quota of reservations in admissions for these groups, and made

provisions for State scholarships to enable them to complete their higher education, without any worry about financing it. We have laws, which provide for reserving a certain percentage of seats for them in jobs under the states and union territories. In spite of doing all this, we have yet to do many other things for the upliftment of our tribal brethren. Firstly, we never seem to have aimed at bringing about an *attitudinal* change in them with a view to helping them understand and accept the wide-ranging social, political, and economic changes taking place all around. Secondly, we have yet to make the learning of English more interesting and productive for them so that they can be put on par with their compatriots in terms of the levels of proficiency in language use.

There are numerous problems confronting teachers and learners in the teaching and learning of English respectively at the collegiate level in the tribal areas of Gujarat. The first major problem is lack of ability on the part of the learners, for a majority of them do not seem to be able to understand how important it is today for us to learn English and how they stand to benefit in the job market if they learn it well. The second major problem is a serious lack of infrastructural facilities even in Government and state-aided colleges situated in rural areas. We have never paid any serious attention to the development of infrastructural facilities.

The third major problem is shortage of manpower both in terms of teachers and those who help run the administration. What would an institution of higher learning be able to do without teachers? No appointment of teachers on full scale has been made in Gujarat since 1997 and those that were made in recent times are as Adhyapak Sahayaks with a paltry sum of Rs.7,500 pm for five years for these Sahayaks in Arts, Commerce, and Sciences Colleges but Rs.20-25,000 pm to those in the engineering colleges. Why did a state once proclaimed No.1 for a few years in countywide annual surveys conducted by the weekly *India Today* allow vacancies of teachers unfilled for nearly a decade or more? What miracle can a state expect from a teacher who has to struggle to make both ends meet? How can it justify this disparity in earnings for the same work, and the resultant discrimination? We have now begun exploring possibilities of transforming education from what it is today to e-education.

One faces an even greater problem and that is one of mental orientation. Numerous confusing thoughts come to haunt our learners when they need to learn English: the notion of English being a 'videshi' language, for instance. We are a race priding itself upon being 'swadeshi', and it is there all over, in history books, in classes, at home etc. I would rather locate its roots in the 'Swadeshi' movement initiated nationally by the father of our nation Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel, but with Gujarat as its base during the British rule. Mahatmaji and Sardar led it in the decade of 1910s as a part of our national

struggle for independence. We have learnt from our history books of the time the impact of this movement on our lives. Everything except 'swadeshi' suddenly became a taboo because it symbolised our then colonial masters. We hated the English and, therefore, we hated and continue even today to hate English language. This hatred was also due largely to our misplaced feeling that English is the language of the English.

Our hatred of our English rulers in the past has made us forget the fact that no language belongs to anyone in particular but to its users even if they were not born into its language community.

I feel happy when I think about the launch of programmes like SCOPE, DELL etc in this context, for these are but some of the initiatives from our current enlightened leadership that aimed at shaking us out of that negative mental orientation, to make us come fully awake from our 50-year old slumber.

If we think long and hard, then we may be able to pin down the problems of teaching English at the collegiate level in tribal areas too:

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|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| a. the state policies | f. the infrastructural facilities |
| b. the society | g. the content prescribed |
| c. the human psychology | h. the materials used |
| d. the pedagogy used | i. the methodology used |
| e. the context of teaching-learning | j. the evaluation of learners' output |

Therefore, let us begin the process of elimination of the items from this list. We would be able to rule out anything wrong with the state policies when it comes to the tribals, for these are geared toward benefiting those among them, the scheduled castes and the socially and educationally backward communities who are pursuing higher education. However, there are problems related to social orientation in the tribal communities. Since they prefer to continue with those of their traditions, rites and rituals, they are apprehensive about accepting anything that goes against these. Given this fact, a majority of tribal parents would not want to send their children to towns for education for the fear of their going away from their roots. Reliance on agriculture in the main forces them to keep their children home to lend them a helping hand, thus contributing to the family kitty. They do so also to ensure that their culture and traditions remain intact, preserved from what they take as 'unwanted influences'.

The problems are often pedagogy-based because teachers' pedagogy is usually defined by the training they might have received, or by the teachers and fellow learners who had influenced their learning of all that they know. These problems may also arise due to poor infrastructural facilities or the prescribing of an 'alien' content with which they cannot

identify. I call the content 'alien' simply because it falls beyond their immediate work-a-day lives. The culprit could also be in the form of the materials prescribed and used for teaching and learning because much of it is culturally biased. Steeped as they are in their own tradition, they find it unnerving to relate to something alien to their own culture. Lastly, we can attribute the problems to the nature of evaluation used, if only because their teachers neither briefed them about these nor did they give them practice to enable them to learn how to respond to certain items in the test/s. If we are indeed serious about solving the problems systematically, then we need to gather the information based on their feedback, analyze, and interpret it to devise strategies for remediation. That calls for a lot of work on our part but that is a part of our duty as teachers and, highly paid as we are, we have lost the right to complain.

We need to understand why teaching of English poses problems in the tribal belts. Why do our tribal learners consider English as an alien language? It is the result of the conditioning of their minds through the constant hammering of 'swadeshi' vs 'videshi' heads as an offshoot of the 'nahi avde' syndrome. It is due also to the fact that English has a cultural orientation different from their own mother tongue/s. What further adds to their problems is the fact that it is taught by people who do not know their language/s (the language of the learners). It is, therefore, prudent on the part of any English teacher to begin his/her work by (i) getting some working knowledge of their learners' language/s, and (ii) motivating their young tribal learners to learn English. He/she needs to impress upon them the fact that English is a vital tool of (a) communication, (b) upward social mobility, and (c) gainful employment and, therefore, must be learnt despite the challenges it poses. This is, to my mind, the greatest challenge before all the teachers of English serving not only in the tribal areas but also elsewhere, especially in colleges situated in the rural areas. The great task of preparing well on the part of the teacher and to impress the learners that English is a vital tool of communication should compel the committed and dedicated among the English teachers to do some serious soul-searching and begin work to seek answers to several questions that would help define their strategies for teaching and learning English in the tribal areas. These are:

1. What does it mean to teach English, and what do we take it to be?
2. What is the rationale behind teaching English to students in the tribal areas?
3. What kind of English do we need to teach the learners coming from the tribal areas?
4. Is there a need for us to redefine the aim and objectives of teaching English to them?
5. Do we need to rethink the methodology we need to use for the purpose?
6. What should be the nature of materials suitable for use in our classes in such areas?
7. Is it possible to evolve appropriate end-course tests for testing learners' achievement?

I shall now try to find answers to these questions.

1. What it means to teach English, and what we take it to be

To teach English means to help the learners:

- a. Understand how each sound in English differs from the other, by differentiating between their structures, and how it is represented in the form of a linguistic sign in orthography. The English sound can easily be compared and contrasted with the sounds in the learners' mother tongue/s, and a teacher must have some basic training in phonetics and phonology to be able to do this.
- b. Articulate the sounds properly with a clear understanding of how these sounds make up a syllable in a systematic pattern, and combine with other syllables to make a word as well as be able to use lines, curves etc to form graphemes by manipulating the movement of fingers and the wrist. The teacher must be a role model for them to emulate. We need not teach them RP, but General Educated Indian English (GIE).
- c. Know words in the lexicon, be able to use them appropriately, and keep on adding new words to his/her own mental lexicon. Problems in the teaching and learning of English largely arise out of limited vocabulary on the part of our learners, and this makes them find their English classes boring.
- d. Use words with a clear understanding of how words differ one from the other in terms of their internal structure, their etymology, inflexional and derivational suffixes as well as other affixes, and how to combine words to make acceptable word compounds.
- e. Appreciate and use their knowledge of the relationship between the component parts in sentences for patterning their language systematically according to need at a given point of time. The English sentence structure, sentence patterns, verb patterns etc vary a great deal from those of our own respective languages, and teaching all this calls for the use of Communicative English.
- f. Understand the meanings of words with regard to reference, truth condition etc, and use language with a clear idea of the structure and context of the utterances in the form of a piece of discourse/text. This draws upon the ability to think logically. Language mimics logic, and semantics, the science of meaning, is all about the use of principles of logic, which define English syntax on the one hand, and phonology and phonetics on the other. Tagged to this is the meaning in a social context.

Teaching our tribal learners to do all this requires painstaking effort and poses a great challenge before any English teacher. The target language we deal with is a foreign language insofar as our learners are concerned. General English (we use strange names like English Compulsory or Compulsory English for it) is taught as one of the obligatory courses at all the three years of his/her undergraduate education. General English is synonymous with English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and only a few of our learners proceed to learn English as a Second Language by offering what we again, quite strangely, call English (Special). English as a foreign language focuses on form rather than meaning, for it is very unlikely that the learners would be required to use English for genuine social purposes. Its importance notwithstanding, neither is it the medium of instruction nor is it the local medium of communication.

EFL aims at giving the learners a working command of both the spoken and written varieties of English. It does not use methods grounded in a theory but a complex of theories drawn from the behavioural sciences and, thus, it is *not eclectic*, i.e., borrows no ideas, style etc from other available sources. It exploits a wide range of materials rather than relying on a prescribed textbook. It lays emphasis on the acquisition of fluency and accuracy in the use of the target language. It does not encourage any explicit teaching of grammar. It sets for itself the target of ensuring an integrated development of skills. It focuses attention on the practical use of the skills of reading and writing. It allows the teacher freedom to make use of flexible teaching techniques. The use of grammar translation method has only helped strengthen the use of the learners' mother tongue/s rather than the target language, English. We need to replace it by communicative language teaching.

2. The rationale behind teaching English to students in tribal areas

We have argued earlier that English is vital as a tool of (i) communication, (ii) upward social mobility, and (iii) gainful employment. NPE-1968, NEP-1986 and NEP-1991 favours the use of English as a Library Language in teaching and learning it in the context of its stated goal, science and technology in our educational system. Our Constitution accords English the status of the associate official language of this country. The world has come to recognise English as a global language. It is from this veritable medley of perspectives on English that we need to locate our rationale for teaching English to the learners in tribal areas.

3. The kind of English we need to teach our learners from tribal areas

Teachers of English need to choose from what Close (1981) calls the 'solid core to decide what they would need to teach their learners from the tribal areas because the solid core represents the essentials of English which the learners must master in order to be able to

use it to their benefit. I would like to share with you the items that Close offers as a part of the 'solid core'. These are:

- a. The basic rules of sentence structure, and the use of high-frequency verbs in the patterns appropriate to them including adjectives and obligatory adverbials
- b. Rules for the pronunciation and spelling of regular noun plurals and of common irregular plurals
- c. Rules for the pronunciation, spelling and general use of the genitive with apostrophes
- d. Personal pronouns
- e. Basic use of determiners, e.g., *some*, *any*, etc as noun-modifiers and pronouns
- f. Use of not-too-complex nominal groups, consisting of premodifiers (including attributive adjectives), head-words, and commonly used post-modifier constructions, e.g., *that big black car in the road*
- g. Indefinite pronouns, e.g., *something*
- h. Use of the imperative; simple present of verbs; and simple past of regular verbs; and forms of *be*, *have* and *do*
- i. Rules for the pronunciation and spelling of the 3rd person singular, present tense; and of the *-ing* and *-ed* forms of regular verbs
- j. Concord of subject and verb, where appropriate
- k. Use of 'phrasal verb' constructions
- l. Irregular verbs
- m. Primary uses of modals
- n. Basic use of progressive with appropriate verbs
- o. Basic use of present and past perfect
- p. The passive, with appropriate verb patterns
- q. Negation; Yes/No questions; and the various types of *Wh-* questions
- r. Basic uses of prepositions
- s. Adverbs, and adverb phrases of manner, place, time and frequency
- t. Coordination; apposition
- u. Compound and complex sentences, with co-ordinate and sub-ordinate clauses, finite and non-finite

Mercifully, our syllabi cover a part of all this in the General English classes throughout the three years of undergraduate programme. What is wrong with it then? My response to this is that we have somehow come to associate the teaching and learning of English with our learners' employability after graduation. A good book titled *English for Career Development*, designed after a lot of research on areas related to the teaching and learning of English for the purposes of career development, holds the key we seek. The book has four sections: A to D. A look at its contents would suffice our purpose:

Section A: Orientation

1. Two different passages on “Correctness of Language” set for reading comprehension with language tasks following thereafter
2. Two different passages on “Some of the Problems Facing Learners of English” set for reading comprehension with language tasks following thereafter
3. Two different passages on “Problems of Writing a Foreign Language” set for reading comprehension with language tasks following thereafter
4. Two different passages on “Students’ Difficulty in Speaking English Properly” set for reading comprehension with language tasks following thereafter

Section B: Communicative development in a professional context

1. Human relationship in academic and professional life
2. Deciding on a career
3. Finding a job
4. Going for an interview
5. Keeping your job: 1 Professional ethics
6. Keeping your job: 2 Health
7. Keeping your job: 3 Balancing family and career

Section C: Writing projects*Writing letters:*

1. Requesting/Explaining leave of absence from work
2. Apologising for poor service
3. Making arrangements
4. Defending oneself against criticism

Writing reports:

5. Account of a task completed
6. Plea for extra staffing
7. Recommendations for promotion
8. Suggestions for administrative reorganisation

Other writing projects:

9. Writing job advertisements
10. Writing records of achievement
11. Publicly thanking users of your public service

Section D: Speaking projects

1. Public speaking: speaking on an official occasion
2. Urging others to a course of action
3. Participating in a meeting
4. Airing grievances
5. Conducting an interview: 1 Interviewing the expert
6. Conducting an interview: 2 Interviewing the job applicant
7. Conducting an interview: 3 Interviewing the consumer

What makes all this workable is an answer key contained within the book. Grammar, syntax, and composition are integral to this text, which does not seem to recommend any formal teaching of all these separately. This brings us to the question on whether there exists a need to redefine the aim and objectives of teaching English to the tribals.

4. Need to redefine the aim and objectives for teaching English to the tribals

My answer to the question is “Yes” again. We live in an age and times when our syllabi must be need-based. An omnibus syllabus will not work as my experience has taught me. Fortunately, for us, we can have a variety of courses introduced under the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) unlike in the past. CBCS allows for a host of foundation courses in English, and one of these could be English for Career Development and Employability. I assure that we can do this if we can persuade the Universities in Gujarat to do so.

A specific need-based course would require that we redefine the aim and objectives of teaching English to various sections of our learner population. For instance, we can have English for Commerce, English for Management, English in Information Technology, English for the Sciences etc. All these could be options within the obligatory foundation courses. You will need to be vigilant to ensure that your university makes adequate provisions for choice so that no one loses in the process: the teacher, the learners, the institutions, or the state.

5. Need for a rethink on the materials we need to use for the purpose

The redefining of the aim and objectives of teaching English would lead to chain reactions, and one of the things affected will be the content. The changed content would require a redefining of materials and methodology. Therefore, a lot of work awaits us in the coming six months in universities of Gujarat that have yet to adopt the CBCS as per the directives of the UGC and the Government of Gujarat. Our teaching-learning material will change in a big way in consonance with the content. We must learn to appreciate the fact that we can no longer rely on the traditional set of materials we have been using for ages now.

The content in need-based courses would require the creation and writing of new materials and the re-working of the existing materials to suit the newer needs. Textbooks had taken precedence over the teacher but this will now change happily. Subject teachers, who are subject specialists, would gain an upper hand in designing their own materials and experimenting with various combinations. Existing methodology will change because our teacher-centred classrooms will stand transformed into learner-centred ones. One of the advantages of the CBCS is that it accords primacy to learners in the entire teaching-learning process and gives the teacher a limited role as a facilitator and final arbiter on matters that require his/her expert opinion.

6. Need for rethinking the methodology we need to use

A change in methodology will also be required in the light of what I have said already. For, a learner-centred, need-based course calls for the use of innovative methodologies. These innovative methodologies will need to be introduced, experimented with, and tested on the anvil of time before these are formally accepted as replacements for the older ones. The time-tested, though infamous lecture method will have to yield place to learner-oriented methods like lecture-cum-workshop, seminar, case study etc.

It seems as if we had forgotten that our learners do not need us as people handing down information but as imparters of knowledge as well as knowledge-generators. Modern media sources have inundated us with a lot of updated information in various subject disciplines, but our learners lack training in the analysis and interpretation of what this updated information can offer. Teachers have a vital role to play here as trainers who give their learners the know-how of the ways in which they could analyse and interpret what they might have read and, at the same time, empower them with the ability to test what they have thus received by seeking to apply it in meaningful contexts.

Institutions of higher learning catering to the needs of tribal learners must take heed to the suggestions Bagai and Nundy (2009) have to make in the context of school education. Educational content must encompass life skills in order to help integrate a tribal child better with the mainstream system. They argue that the life skills such as the following need to be included:

1. *Aspirationa l*: ability to dream about future and remain hopeful even in the face of odds
2. *Linguistic* : ability to attain intellectual and social skills through communication experiences in more than one language
3. *Familial* : cultural knowledge nurtured among kin that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition

4. *Social* : network of people and community resources that can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions
5. *Navigational* : skills of manoeuvring through social institutions
6. *Resistant* : knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality as the basis of resistance to subordination

7. Evolving appropriate end-course tests to measure achievement

The Government of Gujarat has given us a clear signal on what it would like us to do. The test package it has mandated under the CBCS includes 10-15 items in the multiple Choice format, some short answer questions, a few long answer questions, and an essay with a word limit. We will have no choice but to follow this pattern in view of this mandate. However, what we can do is to help build a consensus amongst ourselves on what is to be taught and how it is to be tested, given the course content we have designed.

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