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**‘English’- A Subject or Language:
Issues of Teaching and Learning English among Tribal Students of Alipurduar District**

Dr. Utpal Rakshit

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Samuktala SidhuKanhua College

Abstract

The present paper focuses on the issues of teaching and learning of English language in the tribal areas of Alipurduar district of West Bengal. English is taught as compulsory second language in the govt. sponsored/aided schools in these tribal areas. The principal aim of teaching or learning English is to acquire the fundamental skills of the language namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The study searches the space of weaknesses contributing to the lack of competence level of communication skills among tribal learners. They have to suffer extra pressure handling three to four languages at the same time resulting in manifold inter-language problems. This paper will deliberately include the discussion and opinion of the teachers teaching English in the tribal areas of Alipurduar district to go to the root causes, challenges and difficulties that arise before them. The papers will also endeavour to spotlight practical solutions and suggestions to resolve these challenges.

Key words: English Language teaching, Learning, Tribal Students, Challenges, Solutions.

The learning of language is the root of all education. A language is a structure of vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate. English has been widely accepted as the language of communication, education and business throughout the globalised world. It unlocks new vistas towards the domain of knowledge and makes us prepared to fight the challenges of life in recent technological world. As English language plays a significant part at numerous levels like advanced stages of education, administration, trade, services, etc. it is adopted as the medium of instruction both in India and other foreign countries. English is the language of administration throughout India. Although India is a multi-cultural nation it has become the mutual language of the heterogeneous people and communities. Thus English is an interregional communicative content among linguistically diverse people of India. So the learning of English as second language has been made compulsory at the upper-primary, secondary and higher secondary levels irrespective of the fact whether the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

learners come from urban, semi-urban or rural area.

Teaching of English is as an activity and a conscious effort in India. It has continued in India for more than a century now. Despite this context no uniform arrangement or common agreement on the methods of teaching could yet be developed. In the same way-the term 'Tribal students' also does not refer to an identical group of homogenous characteristics. India as a homeland of several aboriginal tribes shows varying ways of life and cultures. Thus, it would be better to identify the issue in socio-economic, linguistic and geographical perspectives.

Alipurduar district is situated in the north east remote corner of West Bengal. This district has been bifurcated from Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal on June 25, 2014. At the time of 2011 census it was a part (subdivision) of Jalpaiguri district. Alipurduar has six community blocks-Madarihat-Birpara, Alipurduar I, Alipurduar II, Falakata, Kalchini and

Kumargram. Alipurduar is very remote, tribal and socio-economically undeveloped district of West Bengal state which contains multitude of culture, religion, languages. Tribal population of the district lives in low status area, the poverty indebtedness and lack of infrastructure accommodations. The aboriginal advisees mostly migrated from Chhota Nagpur region of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in the tea -growing district of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. Alipurduar is the hometown of various ethnic tribes like Rajbanshi, Rabha, Metch, Santhals, Madasia, Bodo, Toto and Oraons which makes the place more labyrinths. Here, on the one hand, the Indo-mongoloid tribes such as Toto, Drukpa, Mech, Rabha etc. are there, who are indigenous to this region, on the other hand, the tribes of central India i.e. Oraon, Munda, Santal, Bhumij, Mal Paharia are also living.

The average literacy rate of tribal people in Alipurduar is 57.9% whereas the overall literacy in West Bengal is 76.3%. As per 2011 census only 25.9% tribal people live in urban areas of Alipurduar while 74.1% live in rural areas.

Table 1. Block wise population, ST population and overall literacy rate in Alipurduar

Name of the Block	Male Population	Female Population	Total Population	ST Population	Literacy Rate
Alipurduar-1	111378	105553	216931	36605	67%
Alipurduar-2	112434	105838	218272	40245	75.76%
Kalchini	140502	139182	279684	192960	68.92%

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Falakata	149347	141106	290457	59877	72.64%
Madarihat	101576	100490	202068	78314	67.77%
Kumargram	102627	96988	199615	63795	72.42%

Source: official website of Alipurduar district and district census handbook Jalpaiguri 2011.

Table 2. Rural-Urban Differentiation and tribal (ST) Literacy rate in Alipurduar.

Block	Total/Rural/Urban	Literacy Rate (%)		
		Person	Male	Female
Madarihat	Total	58.42	67.84	49.12
	Rural	58.41	67.92	49.03
	Urban	58.92	65.06	52.39
Falakata	Total	55.86	64.70	46.76
	Rural	55.51	64.42	46.36
	Urban	61.23	68.93	53.14
Kalchini	Total	61.62	70.57	52.84
	Rural	61.16	70.34	52.22
	Urban	67.01	73.25	60.49
Alipurduar- I	Total	63.38	71.57	54.79
	Rural	62.60	70.72	54.18
	Urban	78.78	86.55	68.44
	Total	64.04	70.56	57.39

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Alipurduar- II	Rural	63.79	70.42	56.99
	Urban	71.74	74.86	68.88
Kumargram	Total	59.56	67.25	51.69
	Rural	59.37	67.10	51.46
	Urban	79.71	82.93	76.37

Source: Compiled by the author, data from District Census Handbook of Jalpaiguri, 2011

In spite of constitutional guarantees and persistent efforts, tribal communities continue to lag behind the general population in education. The reasons for this can be categorized as external, internal, and socio-economic and psychological. A large number of the advise individuals remain incapable to participate in the development process for the lack of language skills as they are socially, politically and economically marginalised. Alipurduar district has one of the largest tribal populations in West Bengal state.

This paper focuses at the discussion of the teaching and learning of English language among the tribal areas of Alipurduar district. English is taught as compulsory second language in the govt. sponsored/aided schools in these tribal areas. The State of West Bengal following the National Education Policy has implemented the ‘Three Language Formula’ in the primary, secondary and higher secondary schools. The ‘Three Language Formula’ expects the student to learn his/her mother tongue Bengali as L1 as well as English as L2. Though the State has implemented the ‘Three Language

Formula’, it seems that the same policy does not work appropriately in the case of tribal students. Second language learning is one of the barriers faced by the tribal students in their education. The distinctive nuances in their mother tongue and medium of instruction make their language learning more difficult.

The tribal students of class IX to XII studying in a few schools of different blocks of Alipurduar district comprise the population of this study. A sample of 50 tribal learners of the classes and 10 teachers was chosen for the study on the basis of their examination grades and subject specialty respectively. The study was conducted at Dhanapati Toto Memorial High School (Madarihat Block), Santalpur Mission H.S School (Alipurduar-II Block), Taleswarguri High School (Alipurduar-II Block), Garopara Bidhan Chandra Hindi High School (Kalchini Block), Hamiltonganj High School (Kalchini Block) and Birpara High School (Madarihat Block). In all these schools tribal learners are educated along with non-tribal learners. During the study, a case study was undertaken by the researcher to assess the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

English language education of tribal learners. The study also focuses the space of weaknesses contributing to the lack of quality learning. Interviews were conducted among 50 students of class IX to XII, 10 English language teachers. The tribal villages were also visited. The informal interactions were held with some headmasters, other subject teachers, parents and students of other classes. The descriptive survey method has been followed for undertaking the study. As this method deals with the difficulties as such and pursues the solutions of those questions about present state of affairs, so it has been selected. A questionnaire has been developed to get information about the problems faced by the tribal students and another questionnaire has also been framed to get responses from teachers teaching English language in those schools.

Tribal students of Alipurduar district like other parts of India study English as a subject not as a language. They study English only for passing examination. These adivasi students have fear of English. Naturally they find themselves unfit to cope with the competitive world around them. Lack of knowledge of English language builds obstacle in their ways to higher studies and better jobs. Many tribal graduates and post graduates of Alipurduar district are found handicapped in using English language. There is system failure and systemic failure.

The study finds some reasons of difficulties that the tribal students of the

district have been facing while learning English. Normally most of the tribal students consider English as a subject not as a language. These students see that English is the most difficult of all subjects. This is a psychological problem- a biased vision of fear. They ponder over the text meanings and the rules of grammar. But learning language is a matter of skill rather than of knowledge. It generally develops by exercise, not by simply knowing meanings or rules. Most of the English teachers deliver the meanings of the text book in vernacular without considering the difference between the teaching of literature and the teaching of language skills. For examples the teachers are more engrossed in imparting moral lessons of the poem 'Fable' by Ralph Waldo Emerson from class X text book *Bliss* of West Bengal Board of Secondary Education than the in text grammatical exercises of phrasal verbs, voice change and writing activities. Consequently tribal students are more engaged in imaginary conversation between the squirrel and the mountain as they are more familiar with these elements in their environment than concentrating on the text as an example of grammatical rules or structures of syntax. One Santal student of Santalpur Mission H.S School has perfectly memorized the definition of 'moral' related to the poem but failed to mention the tense and parts of speech used in his definition. The same has been found in most of the schools under the study. A few class XI tribal students of Birpara High School and Hamiltonganj High School have described

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the story line of O. Henry's 'Jimmy Valentine' (the story is in their syllabus of West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education) in vernacular but failed to identify the grammar or express it in a simple English. Due to lack of right learning methods they find themselves unable to express in English. They also find difficulty to understand the abstract idea and so they fail to follow the lectures if given by their teachers in English. Teachers have also talked about the difficulty of concretizing the abstractness of the story, poem, passage, words etc. Teachers in these areas do not take much interest in teaching and so students also do not take interest in learning.

The economic condition of this tribal district is very poor. To fulfill their primary needs, here the tribal parents give first preference to their works; hence they allow their child to work to raise the income. This is one of the main limitations for tribal education as a whole. There are various tribal languages spoken in the district i.e. Kurukh, Nepali, Santali, Hindi, Bodo, Bengali and all speak Sadri as language of wider communication. Language is one of the important constraints of tribal children. The tribal students speak their mother tongue or community languages and it is L1 for them. They use Sadri as link language for wider communication among the various communities. So Sadri is L2 to them. The regional language of West Bengal or the medium of their school is Bengali. So 'Bengali' (or in some cases Hindi) is L3 to

them. These tribal students learn English as L4, so far from their mother tongue. So they have to suffer extra pressure handling three to four languages at the same time resulting in manifold inter-language problems. These learners have adjustment problems with school curriculum and teaching of English language. So teachers and students speak in their mother-tongue or in regional language and sometimes use English words in the midst of the sentences.

The principal aim of teaching or learning English should be to concentrate on the fundamental skills of the language and the abilities of these students, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. But in these schools they only think of passing marks. Teachers and the students are both found to look at English as a subject, as an unavoidable hurdle and try their level best to cross these obstacle anyway. These students simply memorise everything. English teachers also teach only a few parts which are important from the examination point of view. They even supply some letters, paragraphs, notices, reports for writing section and ask these students to memories and vomit in the examination hall. In most of the schools of tribal areas malpractice at the time of exam is a common exercise. Many teachers have reported that they found students cheating and copying in exam of English.

Again teachers have complained about the overcrowded classrooms where individual attention is not possible to these students. For conducting effective

RESEARCH ARTICLE

teaching of English through lecture, acting, drilling, response sharing, group or individual conversation the number of students in the class should be limited. The headmasters/headmistress of the schools reported that the ratio of students in relation to teachers is not proportional. So practicing all the four skills viz. listening, speaking, reading, writing is impossible. Teachers have also talked about lot of problems due to the lack of teaching aids. There are very few audio-visual aids available and it is insufficient for the teachers to use it effectively. For the lack of audio tools these tribal students do not get the proper practice of listening English.

So the lack of skill and expertise in English language is identified as a chief hurdle to the education of these learners. Many tribal students of this district are not competent in writing, reading and speaking English. When asked most of them made mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation. They are even imperfect in reading. Most of these students fail in speaking English. Thus they do not get the opportunity to speak in English even at home as nobody at home is educated enough. But most interesting is the response of few divasi learners. 'I am good at English grammar, reading, writing' they said, 'but I cannot speak English'. Teachers confirmed so and talked about their higher grades. This refers to the fear, hesitation and lack of English environment of these learners. Some understand whatever is spoken in English to them but they are incapable to respond.

All the English teachers of the schools highlight the objectives of teaching English. These objectives are:

- To empower the learners to understand English when spoken.
- To empower the learners to speak in English.
- To empower the learners to read English.
- To empower the learners to write in English.

In order to develop the competence level of communication skills among the tribal students the English teachers also recommended some remedies. According to them a well plan for the teaching and learning of English needs a good collaboration among all the teachers of the school.

They are in favour of using English in and outside the classrooms. In these remote tribal areas of Alipurduar district even today teachers are the only resource for English language learning. So all must be aware of the importance of their own language, grammar, pronunciation, choice of words, choice of syntax, expressions etc. Most tribal students agreed that 'teacher talking English' is the only exposure to English for them and they love hearing it. Students want to imitate these teachers and thereby gain their confidence to speak English. Teachers also reported that in initial stage short expressions, easy questions in English to students often

RESEARCH ARTICLE

encourage them for interaction and building confidence. For greater effectiveness and communicative skills English teachers should attend training courses at intervals. Occasional training courses and seminars of the educational department should be enacted effectively. Newly established Alipurduar University should come forward and arrange such types of small training courses to train English teachers.

The English syllabus needs to be restructured for the tribal students in general. It should focus on spoken form and structures of language. The syllabus should be designed with more practical approach so that they know how to use English in their daily life and find similarities and references from their surroundings. Discussion among the teachers emphasizes on the importance of teaching aids in the classroom process. To follow a communicative approach they stress on the usefulness audio-visual aids. Communicative approach goes beyond the grammatical rules of a language and teach how, when and where to use the sentences. Teachers are willing to use an approach which works as the function of a language rather the rules. All mention about the drill method as a very successful way in Alipurduar district where Adivasi students can increase their language proficiency. Teachers with the help of academic councils of the schools have arranged some ICT enabled education in classrooms like, video clippings of dramas, stories, televised lecturers, audio tapes, and computers. Now some schools are using K-Yan, an

integrated teaching device supplied by the government. It is very helpful for teaching English language as an interactive teaching learning platform. Its high luminosity projection system, large screen television, dvd player, in- built audio system, an internet browser and animated English texts are attractive to students. Amit Das, an English teacher of Mahakalguri Mission High School, Samuktala (Alipurduar-II Block) has said, "Our class XII students have got free tablets from the government to continue their education online in this covid situation, their eagerness is remarkable, and they are responding well, I may say better than the classroom." He has further expected, "If we use this kind of device the adivasi students will get attracted towards English and if we can initiate the practice of drilling and short response in them through building a good rapport, then, they can motivate themselves and participate in the class activity."

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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