

BRIDGING THE GAP- APPARENT DISCONNECT IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN COLLEGES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA.

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ABSTRACT: *There seems to be a wide disconnect in the way English should be taught and the way it is being taught in Colleges in the State of Arunachal Pradesh. This is evident from the performance of the students House Test (Internal exam) part of the university examination and the result in the annual examinations. The study of university examination results from 2010-2015 reveals candidates passing out with very low marks in English. The numbers of failures and Compartmental cases are found to be in English mostly. Although English is the official language and the medium of instruction in Arunachal Pradesh, the standard of English does not appear to be in tune with the extent of exposure to English education. This paper is an attempt to understand the apparent 'disconnect' in the intended transmission and expected reception of knowledge in English at undergraduate level and to evaluate factors, methodological or otherwise which may be responsible for low proficiency level of English.*

KEYWORDS: Bridge, gap, evaluation, teaching, learning, socio-cultural.

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that English language has seen phenomenal growth across the continents and is today seen as a global language. Besides many other colonial legacies, the erstwhile British colonies have adopted and adapted the English language as well. Since the sun supposedly never set on the British Empire, there is no country in the world where English (language) has not made its presence felt today. “Whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British empire has given way to the empire of English” (Phillipson: 1992:1). In all the Commonwealth countries, English plays a very vital role irrespective of the constitutional status assigned to it. Though over the years, English language in the Commonwealth and other third world countries has acquired a local tinge, the drive for ‘good’ English continues and the need and the demand for the language is on the rise. India assigned English with the status of associate official language after independence from British in 1947. Hindi is the official as well as the national language of the country.

The importance of English language was realized by many of the educated people in the nook and corners of the country. The need for English language was felt more urgently by the communities whose languages lacked script and were not documented yet. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that a few students of erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now known as Arunachal Pradesh, in India, were foresighted enough to demand for introduction of English as the medium of instruction in the region in 1973. Education, those days was imparted in Assamese (one of the regional language in India) in pre-primary and primary level. English was introduced in the Middle level only. The movement in favor of English as medium of

instruction bore fruit and since the year 1974 English has been the medium of instruction and the official language of Arunachal Pradesh till date with Hindi the national language as the second and Sanskrit as the third language in the middle level (CI-VI-VIII). It is a matter of grave concern that even after 40 years of English medium education, the standard of English is not commensurate to their extent of exposure to the language. The standard of languages, both English and Hindi are much higher in private run NGO schools like Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas, Ramakrishna Mission group of schools and Sarada Mission schools. Moreover the study of university examination results from 2010 – 2015 reveals perturbing figures of candidates passing out with very low marks in English. The majority of the failures and Compartmental (back paper) cases are found to be in English mostly.

One might wonder why vernacular languages are not the medium of instruction at least in the primary level. Arunachal Pradesh is a multilingual and multicultural state. There are more than 25 tribes and equal number of sub-tribes speaking different dialects. Majority of the tribes in the state are yet to develop scripts and document their language. Boti and Thai are the two (2) languages with scripts in the state but as their usage was limited to religious and ritualistic purposes it didn't gain wide acceptance. Another factor could be that speaker of these two languages are less compared to the rest of the population speaking different tongues. These two languages have also been introduced at primary level in their respective area of domicile whereas the dialects of many of the larger tribes are yet to be documented and introduced in educational institutions. Galo language is the only dialect to have been documented scientifically by a linguist from among the many dialects in the state. Some of the tribes have adopted the Roman script with slight modifications to suit their respective linguistic needs but it has not been done with linguistic expertise. There are no regulations in form of Government policy encouraging the development and promotion of local dialects/languages as yet in the state. And the moot issue here is the apparent 'gap' in teacher's approach and learners' understanding to a course of study in English.

English is considered the language of knowledge, power and mobility. A good command over the language is supposed to take one to places in life. Yet the obvious lack of proficiency in English at under graduate level is a pointer to many factors, methodological and otherwise. It raises serious question on the employability of our 'educated' youths in the present era of globalization and cut-throat competition.

This study is born out of my personal experience as a student in rural English medium government schools all through my schooling years in Arunachal Pradesh, observation of my peers, realization of my own linguistic and cultural inadequacies and thirteen years of teaching under graduate classes.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based both on primary and secondary sources. With regards to the former, Classroom Observation task was carried out to assess the teachers' approach to classroom teaching and student's participation in the teaching learning process in the classroom. The task was carried out in two undergraduate colleges: i) D.N Government College, Itanagar ii) Don Bosco College, Jolly. The former is a Government and the other Private College, affiliated to the late Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh. The classes observed were Bachelor of Arts I Year English Compulsory and Elective English classes. In addition, answer scripts of

more than 200 students were evaluated from their House Test (internal exam, part of University Annual exam). From among the 200, 100 were randomly selected and administered questionnaires to understand their socio-economic and cultural background which may throw light on their academic performances.

Finding the Gap: Methodological

Classroom Observation: Teachers

During the classroom observation exercise, it was noted that some of the teachers did not make use of the text while teaching literary pieces like Francis Bacon's essays in the class. Interestingly, none of the students had the text with them. The teacher did not explain the Latin and Greek terms in the text. Majority of the teachers observed made very minimal use of the board. One of the teachers while discussing "Of Friendship" by Bacon, wrongly spelt the word friendship as 'freindship' but the students didn't seem to notice and if they did, didn't point it out. The one striking thing common in all the classes observed was the absence of the 'teacher's meta-language'. The *'talk which is not related to the language being presented: the language a teacher uses to allow the various classroom processes to happen, that is, the language of organizing the classroom. This includes the teacher's explanations, responses to questions, instructions, giving of praise, coercion, collection of homework, etc.'* (Wajnryb 1992 p.43)

As for the teaching skills and strategies went, presentation was fine, eliciting students' response by the teacher was minimal and so also the students' prompts in eliciting response from the teacher. The communication in the classes observed, were mostly one-sided with the teacher doing most of the talking.

Classroom Observation: Students

Except for the Bachelor of Arts 2nd Year English Honors (major) class, all the classes under observation were Compulsory English Papers. These classes had more than 150 students in each section. The students were found to be mute spectator in the whole teaching learning process. Many could be seen struggling with spellings while taking note but they somehow just didn't interrupt the teacher to clarify it. Very few rose to the prompting of the teachers to respond to some query. Many students could be seen reading the day's newspaper, fiddling with their mobile phones and some actually rang in the middle of a lecture! In one of the class, some students slammed the door on the way out after the roll call as they didn't find a place to sit. Students were also seen to be more comfortable responding to queries in Hindi the national language, than in English, the medium of instruction.

Academic

The author evaluated 200 copies in the Bachelor of Arts I Year, 2nd Year Pass and Honors courses. The minimum pass mark for Compulsory Papers are 33 out of 100 and 35 in the case for Honors course. Out of the 200 and more only 34.3% of them scored the minimum passing mark. The performance also highlighted the apparent gap in students' English marks in their previous (10+2) examinations and the current course of study. Many students had high marks in English in their previous classes. The performance in B.A 2nd Year Compulsory English papers was also very disappointing. Barely 42.5% of them could score the minimum pass mark and above. There was found to be a huge difference in the level of performance by the Honors students as compared to score in English in their last examination. From among 50 students in the B.A 2nd yr. English Honors course, 45 had above 55 marks in English in their last

examination but the performance in the current course utterly belied this score. About only half of them scored the minimum pass mark of 35% which is low.

Socio-cultural

The questionnaire administered to the one hundred students was aimed at eliciting responses on:

- Occupational, residential (rural/urban), cultural and educational background of their parents
- Schooling background of the students, whether private or Government
- Proficiency of students in English, written and spoken mode
- Proficiency in their respective mother tongue (L1)
- Access to the sources of mass media and info-tech gadgets (Radio, TV, Internet, cell phone etc.)
- Exposure to spoken English at educational institutions, home and other social spaces.

Responses

- In chronological order, 39.1% of the parents/guardians were educated/literate, resided in urban locations and engaged in gainful employment whereas 60.9% of the parents/guardians reside in rural pockets, unlettered and engaged in subsistence farming.
- As for the schooling type, 64.2% of the students had studied in Government schools compared to 36.8% who had access to private schools with high fee.
- With regards to their assumed proficiency in English, a whopping 81.4% responded to be more comfortable writing than speaking. A mere 19.6% said they were equally comfortable in both mediums.
- 99.9% responded to have had access to one or the other sources of mass media.
- Exposure to spoken English seems mostly confined to the classroom with as high as 92.8% respondents. The other 7.2% agreed to have some level of exposure to spoken English at home and other social spaces.

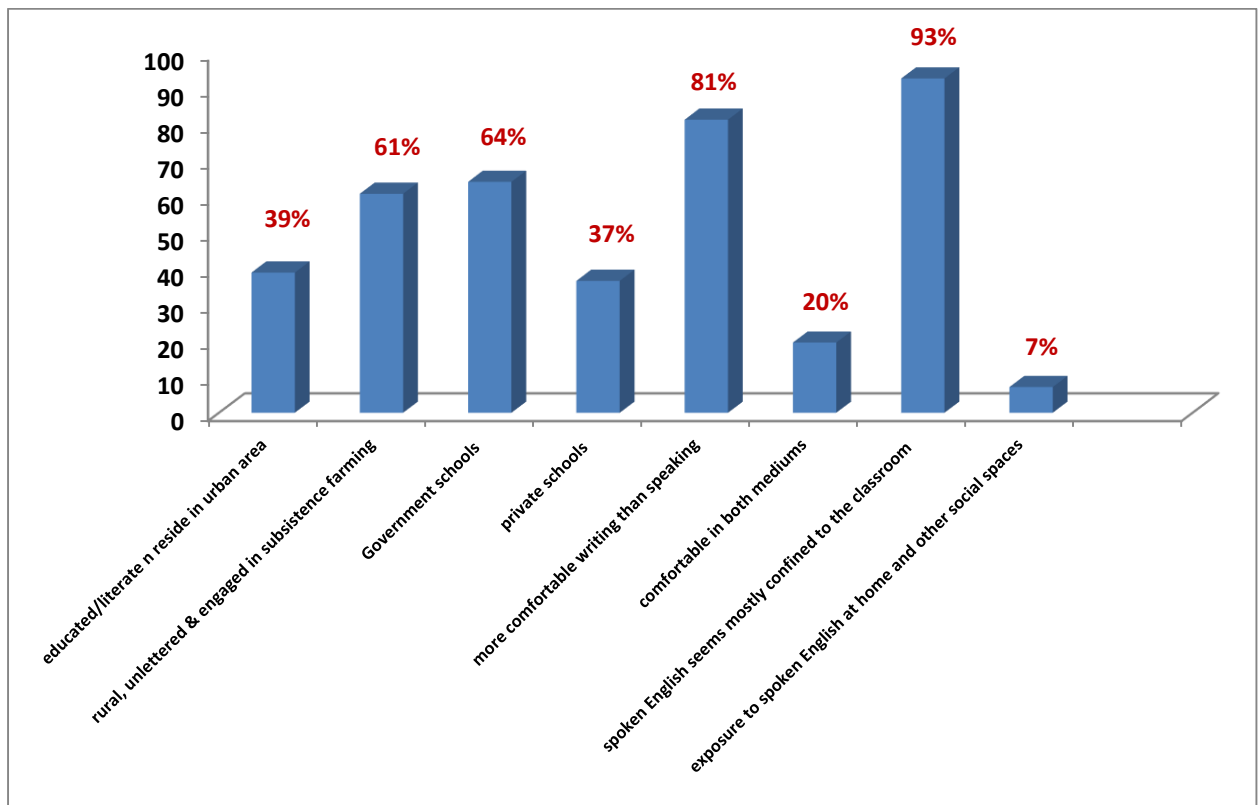


Figure.1.1: Responses pertaining to occupational, residential, cultural and educational background of the students and Parents.

Proficiency in mother tongue was expressed by 67.3%. The rest 27.7% said they just had working knowledge and the remaining 5.4% expressed their inability to speak their mother tongue.

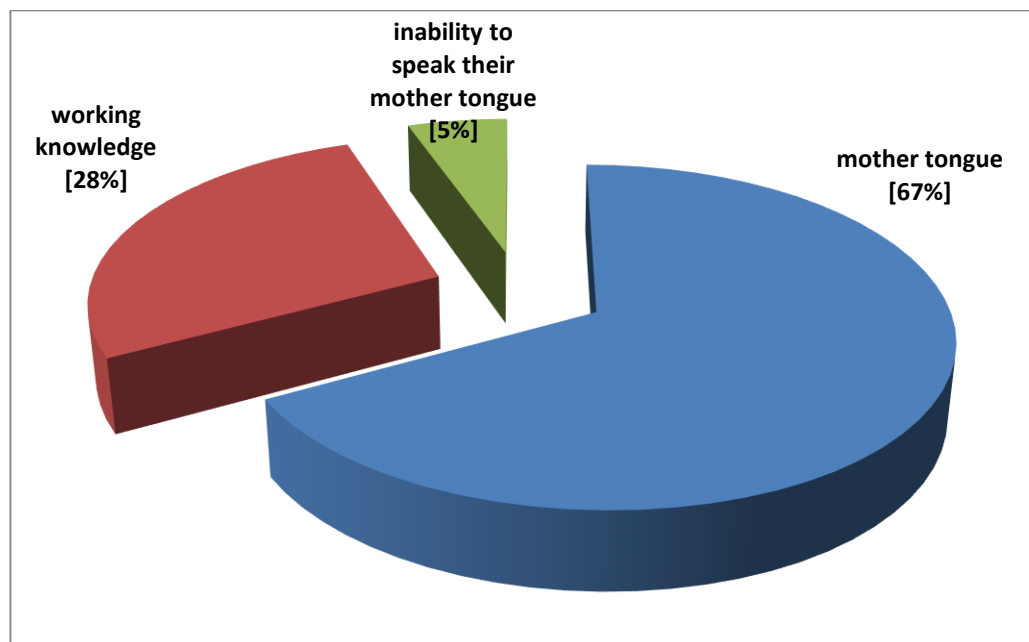


Figure.1. 2 .Proficiency in Mother Tongue

SUGGESTIONS

Academic: There should be forward and backward linkage in the syllabus which the current one lacks. The Ist Year Elective English is completely creative writing oriented devoid of any literary texts and in 2nd Year Honors (Major) they are bombarded with Shakespeare, Bacon and Donne etc. The prescribed teacher-student ratio may be maintained for effective and fruitful teaching and learning to take place in the classroom. The teacher-student ratio in English is 1:600 in the present session. The screening process for selecting for Honors course may be implemented strictly. Securing minimum marks may not be the sole criteria for applying to the course. The university may also ensure strict evaluation of copies. The institution should take stringent action with students found indulging in copying, impersonation and using of electronic gadgets in the examination hall.

Infrastructural: Library should be equipped with relevant books, journals, magazines. The visiting hours may be fixed keeping in mind the needs of the students. Computers may be installed with Internet, Wi-Fi connectivity in the library. Halls for big classes maybe equipped with projector, screen and mikes.

Administrative: Admission of students should be made keeping in mind the infrastructural capacity of the institute to avoid over-crowding and meaningful teaching and learning to happen. The faculty members may also be relieved from many of the non-academic works they are encumbered with such as, Admission Committee, Form fill-up Committee, Scrutiny Committee and Attestation to name a few. They may be encouraged and provided ample time to pursue academic and research works related to the profession.

CONCLUSION

From the above it is clear that the gaps galore in all the sphere of teaching and learning. It may not be possible to address all the issues at the same time. Efforts nevertheless may be initiated to bridge the gaps by identifying the areas on priority and thus improve the quality of English education in the State in the long run.

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