

Linguistic Deficiency of Tribal Learners : How to Mend it

Dr. G.S. Rathore

Formerly Professor, Dept. of English,
Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Tobruk (Libya) &
Vice-Principal (Retd.)
Bhupal Nobles' P. G. College
Udaipur – 313002(India)

Preamble

In any democratic set-up the dignity and basic rights of the individual have to be recognized and social, political and economic justice as well as equality has to be upheld, which implies special care and protection of the under-privileged sections of the society. Therefore, the prudent framers of our constitution applied much thought to the problem of the Scheduled Tribes and included significant special provisions for the uplift and betterment of these people, most of whom are obliged to live much below the poverty line even today. It was, in a way, expiation for the sins of atrocities and suppression perpetrated by our forefathers for thousands of years.

Importance of Education

It has now been realized that these so-long neglected tribal brethren also form an integral part of Indian polity. However, as a weaker section, they need additional care and support, for which three types of provisions, viz. protection, concession and development have been made. It has been felt necessary to patronize and safeguard their rights.

However, it seems neither possible nor feasible to continue the support of such crutches perennially. Therefore, something needs to be done to enable them to run the race on their own. There has recently been a lot of heart burning over the special treatment meted out to them and the issue has started taking serious and sensitive overtones. Therefore, along with the short-term goals of reservation and concession, some long-term goals also need to be set. Education is one of the most important and effective of such goals. *“If you give a man a fish, he will eat it once. If you teach a man to fish, he will eat for the rest of his life,”* suggests appropriately a Chinese philosopher named Kaun-tsu (4th-3rd century B.C.).

Education has also a great role to play in integrating the tribals with the rest of the population, by helping to bridge the chasm of disparities between people, socio-economic groups and regions, and thereby to reduce disintegrative tensions. It develops human resources, which has a multiplying effect on utilization of all other resources.

The aim of education is to equip the learner with the knowledge and skills by means of which he may be able to take his rightful place in society as an adult.¹ The role of education as a process of socialization and as one of the key mechanisms for development of the society at large – tribal and non-tribal – is universally recognised. Thus, it is an investment in development.² Education goes a long way in bringing about the desired and desirable results. Therefore, one of the most dominant features of educational reforms during the past sixty-five years has been the extension of educational opportunities to those who were born in the disadvantaged sections of the society – socially handicapped, culturally backward, economically depressed, linguistically deficient, etc.

Doors of education have been opened wide for all those who had been denied it before independence with a view that enhancement in educational opportunities will enable them to improve their social and economic condition. The National Policy on Education, 1986 gives the following directions pertaining to the education of various disadvantaged sections of society : *“In our national perception, education is essentially for all. This is fundamental to all-round development, material and spiritual.”*

Tribal & Education

In the context of the tribal people, education holds vital significance. In fact, lack of it has largely been “responsible for the exploitation and pitiable plight of the tribals..... Education is the pivot on which their success depends. Education disseminates knowledge. Knowledge gives inner strength, which is very essential for the tribals for attaining freedom from exploitation and poverty. Due to ignorance arising out of illiteracy the tribals have not been able to take advantage of economic opportunities.”³

Why Tribals?

Before we proceed any further it is very pertinent to clarify here that there is very common tendency to club Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes together for the purpose of protection, encouragement and provision of special facilities, causing the fallacy of their being akin and hence requiring similar measures for improvement. Nevertheless, the docile, simple, honest, economically exploited, physically oppressed, socially ostracized, culturally isolated and politically unconscious tribals form a distinct disadvantaged community in themselves. Their similarity with other weaker sections is restricted to the same extreme educational, economic, socio-cultural backwardness, and deprivation; but they differ drastically in several vital respects, e.g. geographical location, historical background, traditional position in the economy and the society, etc.

So, in the Eighth Five Year Plan specific focus was given to “development of confidence of tribals along the desired lines through intensive educational efforts” to enable them to take full and optimal advantage of the developmental activities.

Importance of Language in Education

Education in its wider sense embraces diverse activities through which we come across different experiences and make attempts to learn. This is a lifetime process. But the formal system of education necessitates one or more languages through the medium(s) of which education is imparted, and which are taught in view of their practical utility in life.

In fact, we are all familiar with the complex links between society and language. Almost all societal interactions are performed through language. However, society and language are both in a constant state of flux. We may associate one language or a language variety with the domain of kinship or family, another with the school, another with local administration, and so on. The five common domains of language use are family, friendship, religion, education, and employment, which beget societal multilingualism.

Therefore, the continuance of English Language Teaching(ELT) in India even more than half a century after the British left the country cannot be without valid reasons – political, social, economic, administrative, historical and educational.⁴ To appreciate this properly we need to go into the philosophy of language, history of ELT in India and its need here.

ELT in India

The attainment of independence also brought about a transformation in the linguistic policy of India. It was incontrovertibly clear that English could no longer enjoy its erstwhile supremacy. Hindi, as the official state language, was naturally to become the language of instruction, examination and interview up to the highest level in the state. Nevertheless, if English continues to be taught compulsorily up to the Senior Secondary (10+2) stage in all our schools throughout the country, it needs to be justified. Verma (1989) opines that the need for English at the tertiary level will have to be recognized in terms of new functions assigned to English.⁵

Thus, it does not need any further elaboration that a youth with proficiency in English has an edge over others and therefore, this additional language provides one a leverage economically and socially.

English as Library Language

As mentioned earlier the post-independence shift in our language policy shattered the former dominance of English in various fields. It has, however, been recognised that English will keep on playing a more restricted and more specialised role. It will be unsubstitutable in at least one of its functions, viz. as a '*library language*' – as a tool for purposes of reference in all spheres of education, i.e. as the most effective means of access to modern knowledge.

“According to an American researcher 50,000 scientific-technical journals are published each year in English. There are also 120,000 significant articles; 60,000 new scientific books; and 100,000 research reports in English annually”⁶ which, of course, include translations from several other languages.

Reading : Most Significant Skill

The implications of the use of English are more clearly stated in the report of the Study Group on Teaching of English (1971), according to which our student “must learn how to read meaningfully....with speed and comprehension.”⁷ Unquestionably, India cannot keep abreast of fast striding modern knowledge unless our students can read efficiently.

Here, it needs to be appreciated why a human society needs language. Ghosh and associates (1977) elucidate that the fundamental uses of language are :

- (a) to communicate
 - (i) internally, i.e. between its members, and
 - (ii) externally, i.e. with other societies, and also

- (b) to express and record its culture (including the past of the culture which is called 'knowledge').⁸

Thus, it is clear that language originated as a means of communication—both internal and external – which must have been in the form of speech. In the Darwinian evolutionary process, speech is unique to humans. Later, when a speech community developed mentally to such an extent as to need to record its thoughts, it invented or borrowed a script, and the written form came into being. Our 'Vedas' came down through "*shruti*" tradition (aural-oral), till they got recorded in Devanagari script. There are speech communities even today at the oral stage, i.e. without any written language. Incidentally, the written record forms the overall knowledge of a specific linguistic community. Indian linguists have aptly labelled these two forms as: -

- (a) 'prakrit' i.e. the natural form, and
(b) 'sanskrit' (not to be confused with the language), i.e. sophisticated or polished literary form.

It needs to be understood clearly that since writing is a conscientious activity demanding improvement, the written material without sustainable worth will soon die and only what is first rate will get filtered to the posterity. The written word crosses geographical as well as political boundaries; and travels in space transcontinentally as well as temporally from past to present to future. All this accumulated rich treasure of entire human knowledge can be available to us only if we are efficient readers. Iyer (1986) emphasizing the importance of reading writes: "*Reading is the process of coming in contact with the minds of millions of wise men and women – dead or alive – who have recorded their experiences for the reader's benefit.*"⁹ It suffices to understand how significant reading is. Not only that, reading is fortunately the most convenient of all the linguistic skills as well.

Reading : Most Convenient Skill

Of the basic language skills, speaking and listening are oral, whereas writing and reading belong to the written form of language. Categorised along their roles, speaking and writing are **skills of expression** (or **productive skills**) i.e. used for conveying one's meaning; but listening and reading are **skills of comprehension** (or **receptive skills**) i.e. used for understanding the meaning expressed. Obviously the productive skills ought to be more difficult than the receptive ones, i.e. listening and reading should be easier than their productive counterparts, viz. speaking and writing.

It is true that, whether in L₁ or L₂, the learner is first exposed to listening. Historically speaking also, the spoken form of any language is primary and its written form is a much latterly developed stage. Nevertheless, mere listening cannot compensate for reading and in the system of formal education "*reading is critical for success in school*" as "*achievement of basic reading skills opens the way to all areas of learning.*"¹⁰

As skills of comprehension, both listening and reading entail two factors:-

- (a) understanding, and
(b) speed.

That is, a listener/reader is required to understand as fast as possible. On this dimension, reading is easier and more convenient than listening, owing to the additional facilities it offers, particularly in a Second Language Learning (SLL) situation like ours, which lacks much aural exposure of English. The added aids which reading provides over listening can be enumerated as follows:

- (1) Reading, being a private and individual activity has a very significant psychological advantage for a diffident learner who can benefit a lot through solitary reading. Thus, it helps overcome his shyness initially.¹¹
- (2) Since the skills are mutually related and language exposure of one skill directly or indirectly helps other skills, the resultant better linguistic competence will build up his confidence later.
- (3) As a leisurely activity the reader is free to read according to his mood and convenient time.
- (4) The reader can choose his material to suit his interest, need, level of comprehension, and time available. The listener, on the other hand, may have the only choice not to listen by leaving the place or switching off the TV/radio.
- (5) The reader can consult a dictionary, an encyclopaedia or a knowledgeable person in case of any difficulty during or after reading. Thus, this facility of consultation helps to achieve better understanding of the text.
- (6) The reader can keep his own pace, regulating the speed according to his need, i.e. the amount of comprehension required. In the case of listening the speed is controlled by the speaker.
- (7) If the reader feels that he has not been able to understand any specific thing in the text, he enjoys the freedom to re-read a word, or a phrase, or a clause, or a sentence, or a paragraph, or even the whole of the passage, not only once but as many times as he chooses.

Thus, reading is not only the most important but also the most convenient language skill, and this fact needs to be hammered into the learners' minds in order to encourage them to pay more attention to it.

Now, since the purpose of this paper is not to enumerate and explain the various sub-skills that are involved in the process of reading, we shall not dwell upon the mechanics of reading how the written/printed symbols are associated with certain sounds which go in the making of words and word-groups. Nor shall we treat here the more complex mental sub-skills related to semantics, i.e. how the mind processes the words and groups of words to form the meaning because "*meaning is not constructed from the formal language of the message alone*"¹² (i.e. grapho-phonic-semantic process of sight-sound-sense). Nonetheless, the discussion above suffices to prove that efficient reading, striking a judicious balance between speed and comprehension, keeping in view the purpose of reading and the difficulty-level of the text, is the key to the treasure of knowledge available and preserved in print.

Tribals vis-à-vis Non-tribals

This paper is based on an empirical study of the tribal students made during the academic session 1994-1995. The main thrust of the investigation has been to assess the amount of deficiency in their reading in English vis-à-vis their non-tribal peers, despite the compensatory governmental efforts of almost half a century. This pathology has been followed by drawing aetiology of the debility along psycho-sociolinguistic factors so that having diagnosed the malady appropriate remedy may be taken.

The locale of the study was an identified tribal concentration in Rajasthan called Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) region. However, it is hoped to have wider scope and implications for two reasons:-

- (1) The rugged hilly terrain of the TSP region offers the natural habitat to the tribal people. Therefore, these disadvantaged tribals (viz. Bhils), unlike the plain-dwelling tribals of the

state, have typical tribal traits, developed through segregated life-style away from the larger mainstream, via *“tribalization”*.

- (2) The Bhils, who are the third largest tribe of India, belonging to the TSP region share contiguous boundaries with the tribals of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat.

Eleven Government/Private-Aided schools of this tribal region were selected and a self-prepared Reading Proficiency Test was administered to a total number of 167 tribal and an equal number of non-tribal students of the 13 chosen schools. These students as well as all the English teachers and principals present were also administered respective questionnaires to elicit their responses about the social, economic, cultural background of the students, their attitudes towards tribals, non-tribals, governmental efforts, English language, reading skills, etc.; their motivation to learn English; and so on.

The primary data so gathered were studied along the theoretical constructs pertaining to SLL. The impact of linguistic, social, psychological, economic, cultural factors impinging upon the linguistic proficiency of the tribal learners with special reference to the reading skills in English was evaluated. The study was pitched at +2 stage (Class XII) because, realizing the practical utility of the language, the state government has made provision for teaching it as a compulsory subject up to this class, with sufficient emphasis in the curriculum in order to make students proficient in the language so that they may have no difficulty in higher studies/professions.

Conclusions

On the basis of this study it can be concluded that the tribal students, despite their strong instrumental and integrative motivation to learn English as well as special concessions and incentives of the government, are far more deficient in reading in English than their non-tribal counterparts. However, it is salutary that they have very favourable attitude to learning English and also towards the Target Language Group (i.e. the mainstream). It implies that:

- (a) there are factors, other than innate, which adversely affect the reading of English ; and
- (b) faster and more concerted efforts are required.

Education is the surest and most effective means of improving the existing conditions of the disadvantaged people and to bring them to a level where they can compete with the advantaged. Through education the disadvantaged child can gain some control over his inhospitable environment.

Female education is at alarmingly low level. It is further lower in the case of the tribals, which demands that strong measures need to be taken to accelerate the pace of female education by granting extra incentives, as a tribal girl has traditionally been an economic asset, hence the system of bride price. Educating a boy is educating an individual, whereas educating a girl means educating a family. Maternal care plays a significant role in inculcating “reading readiness” at the pre-school stage.

The **isolated tribal way** of life does not allow for interaction with the linguistically different people, which can facilitate SLL. Their disadvantaged status causes lack of confidence, and shyness. However, the tribal students are conscious and proud of their historical past.

The reading deficiency of the tribal student can also be ascribed to their inability to decode written conventions, which is absent in their own **mother-tongue**. That means that some pre-school development of reading readiness through association of spoken to written language needs to be taken up in Hindi, which may get transferred to English automatically. By encouraging early language development, experiential deficit, like subtle and complex type of formal expressions absent in the tribal language, can also be compensated.

The **home situation** of the tribal students is not conducive to learning in general. The cycle of poverty has been hereditary, not allowing the facilities for learning. Their basic needs exceed the means to satisfy them. Since the parents are largely illiterate or do not have reading habits, they do not read themselves or read to their children, which may arouse desire to read. Their role as a model and guide is absent. The impoverished home without books, magazines, TV, radio, newspapers, etc. does not provide congenial atmosphere for learning/enhancing reading skills. Lack of parental care is reported to hinder focusing sustained attention in reading.

Therefore, if the home of the tribal students is deficient, the school will have to counterbalance. The teacher can enthuse confidence by giving them experience in some small successes. In language learning activity nothing succeeds like success. Motivation coming from increasing competence (i.e. intrinsic motivation) leads to further self-learning.

The **teacher** is the pivot of the entire educational system. Therefore, he needs to know the “*culture of poverty*” and the “*disadvantaged syndrome*”. He should structure a more relevant socio-emotional climate. The teacher is not to condemn their poor performance but to praise their success. He is not supposed to pre-judge that they are less intelligent or not interested in learning.

However, the **non-tribal teachers** are reluctant to work in the tribal areas. Such teachers have negative stereotypes about the tribals and often look down upon them. Therefore, before appointing in/transferring to the tribal areas, they need to be thoroughly oriented with the tribal ways of life and language. A smattering of tribal pupils’ language can do miracles by winning their heart and also help the teacher to explain certain difficult concepts better through their mother-tongue. Concurrently, more and more educated tribals can be encouraged to take up teaching as a career, with whom the tribal pupils will feel more at ease.

A more efficient **teaching technique** of reading skills has to be adopted by the English teachers. The stereotyped method of asking the students to read aloud a few sentences to be followed by the teacher explaining them in Rajasthani/Hindi with a modicum of English here and there will have to be done away with. The students will have to be encouraged to read independently availing themselves of all possible help, including that of their English teachers. Language has to be taught as a ‘*skill*’ like carpentry and not like a content subject like history. Silent reading involves more of language activity on the part of the learner and less on that of the teacher.

Alternatively, the teacher can at the outset help the learners familiarize themselves with the topic in order to give them a foretaste to create expectations and arouse their interest. This is to be followed by the set reading task so that they know beforehand the purpose of reading. Once they have read independently, they should work in pairs/groups. The teacher can help them to check their answers. To discourage slow and ponderous way of reading, a time limit may also be set. After the reading comprehension exercises, a follow-up task(s) related to the text, e.g. a reply to the letter, or what happened beyond the story they have just read, can follow.

For building reading habits and improving reading skills of the disadvantaged tribal students, efforts need to be made from the beginning, i.e. the primary school stage, for which the primary teachers need to be trained. The reading skills learnt in Rajasthani/Hindi will get transferred to

English without much effort. Also, the English teachers can educate the content-subject teachers about what is involved in reading, as a lot of reading is required in content subjects also.

The teacher needs to make the learners understand the importance of reading as well as establish it as a pleasurable and rewarding habit and not a drudgery. He should explain what is involved in being a proficient reader as well as the bad habits which hinder proficiency. However, those readers who cling to such habits as a prop, owing to a sense of insecurity, should not be harassed.

Distance is a major ecological constraint in the utilization of facilities. The distance to school is a source of strain, consumes a lot of the tribal students' valuable time, otherwise devotable to their studies; and coupled with adverse weather conditions discourages them greatly to continue with their educational efforts. The existing hostel accommodations are inadequate. In fact, it is felt that good hostels can work as a panacea for the tribal students.

The **hostels** will remove the economic roadblocks in the pursuance of their formal education and help them greatly in raising themselves through education. Therefore, more hostels with larger accommodation, preferably of mixed nature, to provide lodging and boarding facility to each tribal child are needed. These hostels, situated at towns will also help the tribal students get out of their ethnocentricity as well as rurality and enlarge their schemata through interethnic interaction, which will in turn facilitate greater reading comprehension. Many concepts of modern life, needed to understand school-books, will be clearer to them. If these hostels are flooded with interesting reading material in Rajasthani, Hindi and English, the student will like and learn to read.

The **media** like TV and radio can also be used effectively in this context. The hostels and the schools should be provided with these sets, on which educational/informative English programmes can be viewed/listened to under the supervision of the English teachers. Some relevant language activity like discussion, composition etc. can also follow. The longer the exposure to the L₂, the more proficient the learner becomes.

Suggestions

It is felt that the retardation of the tribals' reading skills can not only be arrested but reversed. What is required is not merely palliatives but sincere and concerted efforts on the part of us all who are sensitive to their problems and desire to do something. For qualitative and definitive improvement to make them proficient in reading in English the following suggestions are advanced:-

- (1) The English teachers, having been educated through English literature and general kind of B.Ed. training, cannot be expected to teach the language effectively. They need both pre-service and in-service (i.e. refresher courses) special training in methodology of ELT, with particular stress on reading skills. In view of this, it is suggested that an independent State/Regional English Language Institute promoting research and training in ELT should be established in every State/Region on the pattern of Gujarat or Karnataka. Or preferably it can be a Language Institute in general imparting training to teachers of different languages. Those teachers who pursue specialized training, like PGDTE from the UEFL (Hyderabad), on their own, should be encouraged with extra increments and promotions. The best teachers always remain learners.
- (2) A team of text-book writers can be engaged to revise all reading books from Class VI to class XII, choosing passages carefully keeping the tribal students in mind. If possible, separate text-books for the TSP area may be prepared with emphasis on tribal culture. Notes and glosses (in Rajasthani/Hindi also, wherever necessary) will allow for independence, which is the ultimate objective of teaching reading. Texts can be printed with divisions into sense-groups, as taking in

sense-groups rather than individual words also forms an important reading skill. A teacher's manual should invariably be provided, with clear instructions for the classroom practitioner about what he is expected to do and how. In books of other subjects also, the tribal life-ways and thought-ways should be incorporated and presented positively.

- (3) Instead of running purely tribal hostels under the social welfare department, mixed hostels, where selected meritorious non-tribal students are also accommodated, should be attached to the schools, and controlled by the school authorities. Staying with such talented non-tribal students will widen the outlook of the tribal students, provide better facilities to both the groups to understand each other and come closer, and will also inspire the tribal students to acquire reading habits and skills by emulating these more studious non-tribal inmates.
- (4) A regular scheduled class period should be allotted periodically to read library books. All young people, especially the disadvantaged ones, need a proper reading climate, a quiet place to read. Delightful books will whet the appetite of even reluctant readers. The young readers can write brief opinions about their favourite books. Classroom libraries with attractive books and magazines can also stimulate the habit of reading.
- (5) Generous donors can be persuaded to contribute new/old books, magazines and other reading material for classroom/hostel libraries. Many of these can be given to the tribal students to keep or to pass on. Easy accessibility to reading material is a prerequisite to promote reading habits.
- (6) School libraries in the tribal areas can serve as community libraries. They should be kept open throughout the year. Schools themselves can be used as community centres to educate about the welfare and social services, as well as to provide learning. In this context the traditional tribal village-head called Gameti can be of immense value and therefore should be taken into confidence. The tribals have great faith in him.
- (7) Tribal students can be hired for various school/hostel/extension activities, in order to help them financially by earning while learning.
- (8) A few books depicting tribal history, life and culture should be specially prepared, which should form a part of every school library. This will, on the one hand, acquaint the non-tribal students with the rich unknown aspects of their tribal peers, thus bringing about closer bondage; and on the other, enhance the self-concept of the tribal students.
- (9) More voluntary organizations should be persuaded to take up the task of tribal education in the TSP area. Nearer the grass-root level with a voluntary input of missionary zeal and commitment, they can be more effective than the government machinery.
- (10) Willing non-tribal English teachers who opt to work in the tribal areas should be given incentives. They can be asked to coach the weak tribal students after the school-hours, to remediate their specific shortcomings.
- (11) Visits of advanced tribals in hostels and schools should be arranged so that the tribal students take inspiration from their own models and form a positive self-image of themselves.
- (12) More frequent summer coaching camps utilizing the services of well-trained English/language teachers should be arranged for the tribal students.

Deprivation in SLL can accrue owing to a variety of circumstances, out of which only a few psycho-sociolinguistic ones at the group level have been taken up in the limited scope of the study. It is justifiably hoped that this first attempt to study the tribals of the state linguistically will set the snowball rolling.

Epilogue

Most of the studies on the tribals end on an elegiac note, mourning the decay of tribal culture and vehemently advocate the protection and preservation of their culture. However, merely in the name of preservation of tribal culture, they cannot be kept underdeveloped for ever. We, therefore, need to expose them to education and make them efficient readers. Then, we can leave it to them how much of their culture they deem appropriate to preserve. Let us provide them initial help to help themselves so as to stand on their own legs.

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