



## A Pilot Study on the English Language Teaching and Learning Problems of Tribal Children of Attappady

### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*The low literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is a serious threat to Indian education. It is significant even to Kerala, the state with highest literacy rate. The intensity of the problem is reflected by the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) examination results of March 2010 where the Palakkad district has scored the less pass percentage of 83.04. The increase in the number of failures and drop outs in the schools of Attappady is pointed out as major cause of the fall by educators and proponents of the State. A Pilot study is carried out in Attappady, the most educationally backward tribal pocket of Palakkad District. The lack of proficiency in English language is identified as a major obstacle to the education of Schedule Tribe learners. The inappropriate syllabus and teaching method of English develops a negative attitude in learners towards learning. The fear of learning a foreign language is one of the factors to stop their education because English language is a criteria rather than an option at higher level. It is clear that tribal learners are not motivated well. They have adjustment problems with school curriculum and teaching of English language. Though the Government can provide grants and scholarships for the betterment of learners, the responsibility of their educational development are ultimately in the hands of teachers. The paper is based upon the pilot study conducted to understand the educational backwardness of tribal learners with special reference to English language. It describes the language learning problems of tribal learners and analyzes the causes of backwardness.*

### INTRODUCTION

India is a pluralistic country with multitude of cultures, religions and languages with rich diversity. The 80 percent of Indian population live in rural areas. The poverty, indebtedness and lack of infrastructural facilities in Rural India had resulted in the inequalities and disparities at various levels. A large number of deprived groups of the population remain unable to participate in the process of Country's development and has affected the country's pace of socioeconomic development. It is severe in the case of Scheduled Tribes, who are socially and economically marginalized. India has the single largest tribal population in the world, constituting 8 percent of the total population of the country. According to the 2001 census, the tribal population in India is 74.6 million. Their social deprivation is reflected in their educational backwardness. Agnihotri (1991) suggested that there were more adjustment problems in the tribal group and so proper remedial measures need to be executed to improve their adjustment.

Several initiatives are taken by governments to overcome the educational backwardness of Scheduled Tribes. But a large portion of the tribal population in India still remains outside the educational system. Even though learners are getting enrolled in school, very less number of them completes their schooling. The increase of number of drop outs is a major problem prevailing in the schools of tribal areas. The language is one of the barriers faced by the tribal children in their education. The difference in their mother tongue and medium of instruction makes their learning difficult. According to Shukla (1994), the achievements of tribal students are lower than that of non tribal students in primary levels. The curriculum, medium of instruction and school system contribute to their low level of achievement.

### NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The low literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is a serious threat to Indian education. It is significant even to Kerala, the state with highest literacy rate. The intensity of the problem is reflected by the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) examination results of March 2010 where the Palakkad district

has scored the less pass percentage of 83.04. The increase in the number of failures and drop outs in the schools of Attappady is pointed out as major cause of the fall by educators and proponents of the State. A Pilot study is carried out in Attappady, the most educationally backward tribal pocket of Palakkad District. The lack of proficiency in English language is identified as a major obstacle to the education of Schedule Tribe learners. The inappropriate syllabus and teaching method of English develops a negative attitude in learners towards learning. The fear of learning a foreign language is one of the factors to stop their education because English language is a criteria rather than an option at higher level. It is clear that tribal learners are not motivated well. They have adjustment problems with school curriculum and teaching of English language. Though the Government can provide grants and scholarships for the betterment of learners, the responsibility of their educational development are ultimately in the hands of teachers.

### OBJECTIVES

- To study the educational backwardness of tribal learners with special reference to English language
- To analyze the causes of backwardness
- To understand the English language learning problems of tribal learners

### METHODOLOGY

A micro approach was made to study and analyze the quality in the education of Tribal learners of Attappady. In the pilot study, 2 schools located in the Agali panchayat were selected.

The study falls in the category of qualitative research as the hypothesis was formulated after the data were collected. The data was collected through Interviews, Observations, a Case study and Focus Group Discussion.

### THE PILOT STUDY

A sample of 20 weak learners of the class was chosen for the study on the basis of their examination grades. The study was conducted in one of the higher secondary

schools of Attapady where tribal learners are educated along with non tribal learners. During the pilot study, a case study was undertaken by the researcher to assess the English language education of Tribal learners and study the area of weaknesses contributing to the lack of quality learning.

Interviews were conducted among several project officials and educationalists of state and district level. The tribal hamlets were visited. The informal interactions were held with some teachers, parents and children. Apart from the Interviews, a Focus Group Discussion was conducted at Agali Block Resource Center with a panel member of 12. The panel members included District Institute of Educational Training (DIET) Faculty, various project Officers, teachers, trainers, social workers and political leaders.

### ATTAPADY – AN OVERVIEW

Attapady is a tribal pocket in Palakkad District, which lies in the north-eastern part of the state. Though tribe folk constitute 1.1 percent of the population of Kerala state, 27 percent of the population in Attapady is tribe folk comprising Irular, Mudugar and Kurumba tribes. The tribal hamlets are found scattered throughout the highlands of Attapady. Most of these are not accessible by motorized vehicle and must be reached by feet. Tribe folk live in an egalitarian community. They are inside thick forests in small huts inside the hamlets protected by a ministry consisting of 'Ooru Moopan'. They lack language of their own but they speak different dialects. Tribesfolk of Attapady are the most backward among the vulnerable groups of Kerala.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING SITUATION IN ATTAPADY

English is introduced as first language in the schools of Attapady with six periods allotted per week, as per the government norms of provincial level. The tribes live in hamlets inside the forests. The government schools are situated far away from the tribal hamlets. Hence as an initiative, Multi Grade Learning Centers (MGLCs) are introduced in tribal hamlets for making the primary education accessible for the tribal children. It was established under the supervision of SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) of Central Government with a subunit of Block Resource Center (BRC). In MGLCs, a single volunteer teacher teaches all the subjects. The first to fourth grade learners are accommodated and trained together in one classroom. Even though children are getting enrolled in schools, only a very less percentage of them continue their education. The increase in the number of drop outs is one of the major causes of educational backwardness.

According to many child psychologists, children reach an important developmental stage at the age of ten (Lambert, & Klineberg, 1967). Studies show that there is a direct correlation between the amount of time devoted to language study and the language proficiency that the students attain (Curtain & Pesola, 1988). It can be argued, therefore, that children who begin foreign language study in elementary school, and who continue such study for a number of years, have a better chance of developing a high level of foreign language proficiency than do students whose foreign language instruction begins in the post elementary school years. While educationalists and language experts all over the world insist the importance of effective language instruction from the grass level, in MGLCs, English is trained merely as one among the many subjects. Though students are retained in MGLCs, they are not properly trained here. While MGLC can be appreciated as an expansion of the Indian educational system, the concern of quality of education still remains as a question to be addressed.

After acquiring the basic education from Multi Grade Learning Center, the learners are shifted to Government schools, where they are trained along with the non tribal learners with

the same curriculum and syllabus. The Government schools are situated far away from the tribal hamlets and hence the tribal children have to reside in the hostels for the education. The tribal children undergo lot of adjustment problems while getting accustomed to new routine in the hostel and results in the poor mental health. The tribal learners are mild and passive in the classrooms. They may be physically present in the school but intellectually not involved in the school work. From the pilot study conducted, it is derived that tribal learners score less marks than the non tribal learners.

### THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The revised curriculum and syllabus is based on the newly introduced Constructivist pedagogy of language learning. It suggests that language learning is similar to the process of mother tongue acquisition. Noam Chomsky in his 'Criticism of Behaviourism' in 1957 stated that 'children must have an inborn faculty for language acquisition'. In 1998, the Second Language Acquisition Programme (SLAP) was initiated by Shankaran and Anandhan in Kerala. The theoretical origin of SLAP is derived from the Cognitive Theory of Language Acquisition based on Chomskyan School of Linguistics. According to the theory, a child is genetically endowed with the language system, known as Universal Grammar. Language acquisition is the unfolding of inner system. It is a non-conscious and non-voluntary process.

The current approach advocated in the curriculum is based on Chomsky's concept of innate language system. According to it, the environmental factors contribute to the process of language learning. The natural atmosphere for learning has to be made inside the classroom with less cause of fear and anxiety. It provides ample opportunities to participate in the learning process. It works on the principle on 'Learning without Burden'. A child must not be forced to learn rather he himself has to feel the need in him to learn. It captures the interest and involvement of the child.

The learning is considered as a cognitive process that can be facilitated by teacher and developed by peer interaction. It claims that a language system can be acquired through recurrence and not by repetition. The system has no concept of 'failure'. The errors are considered as an essential aspect of learning and therefore risk taking is encouraged. The role of teaching materials is minimal. The text book is flexible and designed in such a way that it can be used in variety of ways and for variety of purposes. The language learning is extended to the range of application and experience from the set of rules and practice. The focus is given to creativity and thinking skills with due importance to LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) skills.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROBLEMS OF TRIBAL LEARNERS

The tribal learners who live in a different culture and setting have more difficulties in learning a foreign language, unlike other learners. The tribes live in a community where they have a mother tongue of their own, apart from the regional language of the state. The mother tongue of tribes is known as 'aadhivasi baasha' and it has no script. The children of non tribal parents who are familiar to scripts and texts from their very young age through their family and culture have greater possibilities of acquiring a new language. But the tribal learners who are less exposed to scripts and readings find it difficult to learn a new language. The problem becomes crucial when they enter into the primary education, where initial training is given on words and sentences through contexts rather than teaching through the set of sounds and symbols.

The Hindi is a compulsory language in the school and education. Apart from their mother tongue mother tongue, tribal learners have to learn Hindi, Malayalam and English at school. Hence they have to undergo additional stress in their lower classes handling three to four languages at the same time resulting in multiple inter-language problems.

Some of the difficulties can be attributed to the peculiar irregularities in the target language itself. English is the language with more number of sounds than its symbols. Hence each symbol is used to denote more than one sound. The inability to read the texts is identified as a serious problem of tribal learners. The learners of 8<sup>th</sup> grade are not able to identify the alphabets and perceive the texts. The lack of training in 'phonemic awareness' and 'phonics' methods in reading are identified as the root cause of learning deficiency. According to Report review of the research of 'National Reading Panel' on 'Teaching Children to Read', 'phonemic awareness', 'phonics', 'vocabulary', 'fluency' and comprehension' are identified as the five building blocks of any effective reading instruction. It helps learners' word reading and reading comprehension, as well as helping children to spell. Phonemic awareness is the basis for learning phonics.

The heavy contrast between the mother tongue and English is an important cause of learning difficulty. For the tribal learners, the home and local environment is not favorable enough to create an linguistic bridge in the inter-language process. The tribal learners who are considered as 'disadvantaged' and 'backward' is seen to be totally alienated from the school. There are large numbers of learners who do not have any command of English. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade learners are still not able to read or write. Some of them not even know the spellings and basic structures of English language. The syllabus and methodology of English curriculum seem to be favorable for the above average learners who can work independently and succeed. It would be helpful for them in using the English language naturally and pursue their higher education in English medium successfully. The presentation of vocabulary and structures in an unsystematic manner is not the appropriate method of teaching for the weaker learners.

## CONCLUSION

The tribes are the essential gifts of our nature. Hence it is our duty to bring them up as developed in the society. They are also ordinary human beings like us, who should participate and socialize in the society. This is possible, only when they have a language at hand, which can bridge them to the larger world. Thus English language teaching is to be focused more in the tribal areas for their betterment and active participation in the society. This is possible only by creating more language teaching methods in the class rooms which makes the learning, a part of experience. Proper awareness is to be given among the communities to make them realize the prospects of English language in store for them. The knowledge on addressing bi-lingual classroom, understanding the tribal situation as a special group can bring the tribal children in to the mainstream keeping their level of achievement intact at par with the other children of other contexts.

In the Indian situation, the content and process need to be adaptable for the children of special needs. Due to the gap between the home language and school language, and due to the gap that exists between the content of the curricula and the external context in which the tribal children live, the pedagogy followed in teaching the other learners will not be effective in the tribal classrooms. The questions relating to content, process, teaching, and learning follow only when the issues of language is addressed at first.

The problems might change after two or three years, if steps are taken to make changes in the scheme and syllabus. But at the present we have to handle the learners in the higher classes who lack even the basic level of competency. This is not a task which can be achieved through ordinary teaching or training. It requires adaptable approaches.

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