

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is on how tribal students use language to make meanings with each other as they carry out the activities of their social and academic lives. Language and culture are connected in several intricate and dynamic ways. English language teachers must reach out to the tribal learners in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate. They must examine the cultural assumptions and stereotypes that they bring into the classroom that may hinder their language acquisition. This article documents the problems faced by students and teachers in learning and teaching language effectively. This paper aims at arriving at solutions bequeathed by culturally responsive English Language Teaching with Systemic Functional Linguistic approach.

Key words: Cultural assimilation, culturally indigenous study materials, authentic cultural capsules.

Introduction

English language has to achieve three major purposes namely, to signify experience, to set up and sustain interaction between people using language and to create connected and coherent discourse. Languages are organized into these three components branded by the name contextual, interpersonal and textual. Language study should focus on meaning and the way people mark meaning. To achieve this end teaching English as second language is done by SFL approach and by drawing materials from culturally indigenous materials (Robinson 1985:16 like folk tales, folk songs, legends, myths, dances, festivals, rituals, ideologies and so on translated into English and use such material for teaching of English

Gudalur is a small town which is inhabited by migrants of Kerala, Karnataka, Sri Lanka. Belonging to the territory of Tamil Nadu, it has a majority of Tamilians. But the Adi-Vasis (tribes) are

the sons of the soil. The main occupation of the villagers is farming. All men and women below the age of 50 go to the estates and fields to work. Old people stay at home to look after the children. Tribal men collect herbs and medicinal plants from the forests for Aariya Vaidhiya Salai, in return for money. Tribal women work as house maids and cook midday meals in local schools.

The Tribal Schools

Since 1956, the formal Education Department of Tamil Nadu has been running residential educational centres in the village to educate Adi -Vasi children. Only those who are 7 years of age attend class 1 at the school, where they are taught only in Tamil. The headmistress (teacher), who is paid by the government, lives in a small room at the school along with the tribal students. The school has a blackboard, some charts, maps and textbooks. Young literate boys help the teachers for creating awareness with regard to forest, land protection and human rights. There are of course schools run by Christian Missionaries such as CSI Tribal Schools and ACAD. The teachers of these schools face insurmountable difficulties to make the students learn English to pass the examination which is their ultimate purpose. Hence a research is conducted to improve language teaching in terms of educational context, computational context and sociological context with the help of Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Teachers' Language Research

The focus of this research is on how people use language to make meanings with each other as they carry out the activities of their social lives. They do this through their selections from the circles of choices that are available in the language systems. The choices individuals can actually make from these systems are controlled by two features. The first is that meaning is always constructed within a context and context confines the series of meanings that can be selected. There are meanings that are expectable and suitable to contexts of all kinds. It ranges from what we would expect in a classroom to what we would expect in a social gathering. The second factor that constraints individuals' linguistic choices is that not everyone within a culture or community has admission to all of the possible contexts and therefore all the possible ways of speaking or writing. Due to their sociocultural setting, some people would find it very difficult to communicate with partakers.

SFL approaches the explanation of social context by understanding it as two correlated levels: context of situation and context of culture. The context of situation is the immediate context in which

the language is used. The same context of situation may be different in different cultures. The context of culture can be thought of as the full range of systems of situational contexts that the culture embodies. (Halliday and Hasan 1976)

Any context of situation is described in terms of the three main variables that influence the way language is used. Field is concerned with social activity, its content or topic. Tenor is the nature of the relationships among the people involved. Mode is the medium and role of language in the situation- whether spoken or written, whether auxiliary or primary course of the activity. The field we refer to in this paper is the classroom. Tenor shows the relationship between the tribal learner and non- tribal teacher. Mode explains the role of language in teaching the tribal learners.

But the ways in which language is organised for use are influenced not by immediate context of situation. Language choices are also influenced by the context of culture. Cultures change identifiable ways by which members can achieve their social purposes in the range of situations they naturally experience. These ways may encompass language to a greater or lesser extent. Everyday routines like buying goods and personal conversations are not heavily dependent on language while other practices such as a general essay or a character sketch is entirely constituted by language. Any such culturally recognized practice or genre involves its own characteristics text structure. Context of situation and context of culture influence the constructing of language for use.

The field of discourse refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in. But we can also infer interpersonal meanings or the nature of the relationships among the participants. We know from 'Please keep quiet' that the speaker has the power to command other participants in this social context. We can tell from forms of address such as 'Sir' or 'Miss' or the use of participants' surnames or first names, something of how well the participants know each other and perhaps even how they feel about each other. Such meanings relate to the virtual power or the status of participants, the degree of their interaction and move. These dimensions are part of what Halliday calls Tenor- the second of the three key variables in the context of situation.

The Tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles. It also refers to what kinds of role the relationships obtain among the participants both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially substantial relationships in which they are involved. For instance the teachers help the tribal learners

to use appropriate words in apt situations. When the student meets an elderly person of a good status, the child should use the language which conveys not only the meaning but a sense of respect. E.g. 'Please excuse me Sir' or 'May I disturb you for a while'.

The mode of discourse refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation. It also analyses the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has and its function in the context. It asserts what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as convincing, introductory, and didactic.

We can see that the three contextual variables- Field, Tenor and Mode are related to the three different dimensions of meaning- conceptual, interpersonal and textual. These main functional regions of meaning in language, have been annotated in various ways. One way reported by Martin (1991a: 104) says that conceptualize interprets 'reality', interpersonal 'social reality' and textual the 'semiotic reality' that manifests itself as text- as meaning is made.

All situations are characterized by particular values of the three contextual variables- field, tenor and mode to which Martin (1991a:123) allocates the canopy group register. There is a consistent relationship between particular features of the context of situation and the metafunctions of language. The relationship is two dimensional because one can infer the values of the contextual variables from the language of the text and one can also predict the meanings likely to be constructed in language from the values of the register variables.

Cultural Awareness

Language can never be fully understood without necessary cognitive awareness about the culture of the people that speaks the target language. This means that language learning is a cognitive response as well as the way we comprehend a culture and obtain data. Language and culture are connected in several intricate and dynamic ways. It is therefore impossible to teach a language without relating it to culture. This insight of cultural teaching in the classroom is derived from social and cultural anthropology, which provides a +complete description of the way of life of a society.

Problems Faced by the Tribal Learners and the Remedies

1. Why do education systems disadvantage tribal children?
2. How are English culture biases created and maintained through the language of interaction?
3. How can people learn to be critically aware of the ways they are socially positioned in the texts they read?

The current education system is disadvantageous for the tribal children because the nature of family linguistic interaction varies as a function of social class location. They are not very familiar with L1 since they know only Adi- Vasi language till the age of seven. Learning L2 becomes a herculean task because they find themselves lagging behind.

The English culture depicted in their text books evoke a sense of alienation. The tribal learners feel that it doesn't make any sense to them. Whereas the supplementary reader containing works of Indian writers, with the text relevant to their culture may seem comprehensible.

The learners should read, understand, criticise and rework on the text. He should understand that language education will take him a long way in the society. Basil Bernstein, from his early work in 1950s on the outward differences in school performance of students of different social classes, Bernstein developed a detailed sociological theory addressing questions of social structure, power relations, the differential ways in which power and knowledge are distributed and the mechanisms by which such distribution occurs. Fundamental to this initiative, is his theory of codes. He describes a code as a regulative attitude which controlled the forms of the linguistic understanding of speakers in different socializing contexts (Bernstein 1971: 15)

Conclusion

The SFL approach helps students to increase their level of literacy. The approach has a crucial role in literacy, it concentrates on the production and analysis of texts in a given language. It helps the learners to relate language and content. Though systemic functional linguistic seems complicated, it would be useful in terms of pedagogy. The communicative competence of the tribal students would be satiated by using SFL approach along with culturally indigenous study material.

Techniques for Teaching of Culture in Language Courses

1. Authentic Materials: Video clips, recorded authentic interaction, extractions from televisions, photographs, pictures
2. Proverbs
3. Folktales
4. Role Play
5. Local literature
6. Culture Capsules

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