

Deconstructing the Politics of Access: The Case of the University Student

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Introduction

As we address the issue of access to English for the large majority of young people in the country, i.e. those who have had many years of formal instruction solely devoted to teaching it as a subject in a vernacular medium school but with not much success, there are certain aspects that seem axiomatic. Therefore it is necessary to put them down right at the start to clarify the premise on which this paper is based.

Firstly, we acknowledge that because of its status as an international/global language, English proficiency has become an asset as it allows upward social mobility within the country and also opens the door to numerous opportunities all over the world. Kachru's (1986) comment made more than two decades ago that 'Knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates of international business, technology, science, and travel' (p. 1) is probably more true today. The recommendation made by National Curriculum Framework (2005) endorses this further: 'English plays an important role...it is...a passport to social mobility, higher education, and better job opportunities...It is indeed unfortunate that English has so far remained associated with the rich, elite or upper middle class. It should be the effort of the Indian educational system to reach English to every Indian child and to ensure that she/he gains a sufficiently high level of proficiency in it and not suffer discrimination for lack of it' (p.58).

This therefore raises the second point about equal access vis-à-vis social justice. The view, namely, *right to English* based on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' (1991) makes it imperative that we make English accessible to everyone, regardless of one's caste, religion, socio-economic status, geographic region and so forth, thus following principles of social justice (Rawls 1999). Tollefson (1991 citing Manley 1983) states, 'equal opportunity to compete in an economic or educational system in which there are a large number of losers furthers inequality in the name of equality and contributes to the mass acceptance of privilege for the few' (p.15). The National Knowledge Commission (2006:1) underscores

this view explicitly: 'English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which makes for *highly unequal access*' (emphasis mine).

The Context

Given this premise, I would like to examine the case of adult learners at the tertiary level who, until 2003, studied English for around 500-600 hours in vernacular medium schools, i.e. for 5-6 years up to Grade 10 before they entered University, but did not acquire the necessary competence. They are not able to use language skills with ease or at the required level, i.e. they cannot read, write, speak or listen in 'new' academic or social contexts. (A report from NASSCOM says only 10 percent of fresh graduates are actually employable.* This is attributed to the lack of soft skills, including the ability to communicate in English). These students have since 2003 been studying English for many more hours in at least 18 of the Indian States which have introduced it in the early years of Primary school; this is a matter of grave concern since the exposure the student has to an acquisition-poor learning environment is of a longer duration, if worse in certain regions due to paucity of competent teachers or to school-based constraints.

One of the reasons for this is that these students have had Hindi (or other regional languages) as their medium of instruction up to the school level or have been in not-so-good private schools where, although the official language of instruction is English, for their day-to-day and classroom purposes, Hindi (or the regional language) is the *lingua franca*. Other, probably more important, reasons relate to the curriculum, text books, classroom pedagogy, tests/exams, teacher competence and attitude, to name a few. There has been some effort to systematically study the reasons for this state of affairs (see for example, Kunnan and Mathew 2006, Ghatage 2009, Mathew and Pani 2009): Ghatage's study indicated lack of fluency and confidence on the part of teachers, increased workload that the 'new' approach demands, and lack of infrastructure in schools. The other two studies carried out in Government schools of two States, i.e. Orissa and Delhi clearly indicated the following problem areas, among others: teachers' own language and pedagogical competence along with their not-so-positive attitude towards disadvantaged learners; a text-book approach (as opposed to a communicative methodology) in which the teacher tries to convey the meaning of the given text in different ways, i.e. by explaining it in simple language, translating it into the mother tongue, etc and helps them to answer questions based on the text. Thus what is done is clearly content-based as would other subject teachers do, for example, in social studies, math or science classes. Also, the exams at Class X and XII levels demand very little by way of students' use of language in these four skills areas; very often they are rehearsed/memorised answers to known questions and students are never or very seldom required to demonstrate their reading or writing ability. Oral skills are almost never tested and therefore not taught in any serious manner.

* <http://topinews.com/mainstream/tag/nasscom/> Accessed on 20 September 2010

When such students enter University, their poor language proficiency coupled with low self-esteem impedes their academic study and future life in major ways. Therefore, the tough question that faces us is, given the set-back, how can we equip them with the necessary (language) skills and strategies and empower them to become full-fledged participating members of the University vis-à-vis the society?

The next section presents a discussion of what might be a reconceptualisation of a pedagogy that opens up possibilities for students to acquire communicative competence as well as to explore how language shapes subjectivities and is implicated in power and dominance.

A Pedagogy of Possibility

Peirce (1989) argues that teaching of English can indeed be undertaken as a *pedagogy of possibility* (Simon 1987), an approach that challenges inequality in society rather than perpetuating it. Following from work on poststructuralist theory of language, where 'language is not only an abstract structure, but a practice that is socially constructed, produces change, and is changed in human life' (Peirce Ibid: 405), she examines the limitations of the theory of language first proposed by Hymes (1979) and suggests that we need to actually go beyond it. Hymes had suggested that when we learn a language, we need to learn not only the rules of grammar but also the rules of *use*, i.e. the ability to decide when to speak, with whom, where, in what manner. Peirce (Ibid) suggests that we need to explore a second-order of questions such as the following: Why do such rules exist? Who makes them? What interests do they serve? Can these be contested? Are there other rules that can expand possibilities? She is of the view that if we teach students to critically examine the rules that are often constructed to support the interests of dominant groups, we will actually help them to challenge the conditions that form the basis for those rules; they will learn to examine the way they perceive themselves, their role in society and how the society can be changed for the better. An uncritical integration into the society will on the other hand promote existing inequalities and widen the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

This kind of pedagogy, which Simon (Ibid) calls the pedagogy of empowerment, is not neutral but a practice of 'cultural politics', since teachers consciously or unconsciously shape students' perceptions of themselves and the world. 'To empower is to enable those who have been silenced to speak. ...It is to enable those who have been marginalized economically and culturally to claim in both respects a status as full participating members of a community' (Ibid; 374). Peirce (Ibid) further distinguishes the notion of self-directed learning (Dickinson 1987) from empowerment where the former is aimed at enabling learners to take charge of their own learning while the latter helps them to take responsibility for success in life, success not only 'in terms of material advancement but in terms of the learner's greater

understanding and critical appreciation of his or her own subjectivity and relationship to the wider society' (p.409). Thus, adopting a pedagogy of possibility encourages students to explore what is desirable as opposed to limiting their growth.

This pedagogy also addresses the 'access paradox' (Lodge 1997, cited in Joseph and Ramani 2006): while providing access to a dominant language further entrenches its dominance and hegemony, not providing access entrenches marginalisation and increases value and status accorded to the language (see Tully 1997 and Mathew 1997 for a discussion of this point). A step towards making this 'capital' accessible to all our learners would be to 'de-elitize' it and consciously tone down the aura that goes with it (see Granville et al 1998). Although implementation of this notion is rather tough, in that while we would like everyone to learn English, the role of English in a multilingual context such as ours seems rather ambiguous and there seems to be little concern for the devastating effect English teaching has, especially at the lower levels, on local indigenous languages, which Pennycook (1994) calls *linguistic genocide*. We will need to encourage additive bilingualism (or additive multilingualism) where we can learn L2 and L1 with equal competence, as the work of NMRC (National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium) demonstrates in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

This line of thinking finds echoes in work done by others, most notably by Freire's (1970) *dialogical pedagogy*, Giroux's (1988) *critical pedagogy*. While this pedagogy could form the basis for education at any level, I would like to argue that it is urgently needed for adult learners, the subject of this paper, not only because they have suffered a set-back but also because of their quite well developed cognitive, affective abilities and other language skills, for example, their L1 or the regional language, which enables them to confront hidden and taken-for-granted assumptions and the political nature of language.

The Case of Delhi University

In this section I will briefly describe the effort being made to get the university students who have lagged behind into main-stream by providing them the necessary tools to confront this impasse. A scheme, known as the English Language Proficiency Course (ELPC), outside the regular University academic programme, offered at Basic, Intermediate and Advanced levels comprising 100 hours each, has been designed for such students. While this appears like a common solution most universities offer especially as part of their language centres, there is a deliberate effort here to address some of the issues raised above. I would like to in fact argue that a version of pedagogy of possibility is being tried out, if not in all its entirety and complexity. It is also possible to visualise how the philosophy underlying this approach can guide more systematically future conceptualisations of the programme that is in its third year.

Student profile: The students who enrol on the programme are students of under-graduate, post graduate or Ph. D. programmes at the University who all have had at least 8-10 years of formal instruction for learning English as a subject, some of them from English medium schools. Majority of them are humanities or commerce students while some research students are from the sciences. Their single-most desire is to be able to speak English fluently and well; PG and research students have as one of their goals, *to write better*, especially their assignments and dissertations. A striking feature of this large group is their high level of motivation: they are willing to spend 6 class-hours a week for about 4 months after their work at the University and some more time outside class to be able to gain confidence and competence in using the language. A comment heard quite often is that they are 'willing to do anything' to learn English. Their own assessment of their ability, which they indicate while filling up the application form, also shows that they are not too good at speaking, writing, reading and listening, in that order.

Materials used on the course: Since the materials available in the market have been found unsuitable in terms of language/cognitive levels, subject matter/content and format for the intended learner, they have been specially designed for this purpose. The use of loose-leaf, theme/task-based materials developed by teachers thus marks a departure from an expert-oriented model; the materials also undergo regular revision based on the feedback received from both students and teachers during and after the course. Thus, it is *process-oriented* and is set within a *stakeholder-approach* to curriculum design and implementation. Although these are well-known notions in ELT literature, in the Indian context where a top-down syllabus and text-book approach is the norm, this is significant. More importantly they have been designed to suit young adult learners' needs, aspirations, and perceived goals. Questions to students such as *What other kinds of texts do you like? What types of activities do you like to do? Which areas would you like to focus on more?* yield usable results and are incorporated into tasks and activities quite systematically.

Teacher profile and classroom pedagogy: The (university) teacher is a volunteer just as the student, who is willing to confront well-established beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes university-teaching, perceived student goals and roles vis-à-vis his/her own, the notion of a prescribed syllabus and text book and so forth. A week-long orientation to what teaching/learning a language (as opposed to a content-subject) involves, and to issues about the disadvantaged adult learner is a first step in initiating the teacher to nuances of this complex enterprise. Ongoing dialogue/negotiation among everyone concerned - me, the Coordinator, teachers and students - an important feature of the programme, is achieved through emails, visits to the Centre where the course is taught, and review meetings where feedback from teachers and students on different aspects of the course is examined.

Our learning so far: The following examples (actual words of students and teachers are in *italics*) serve as evidence of the issues that are being addressed:

Students have invariably benefitted a good deal as revealed through scores on end-tests that focus on all the four skills of language and through teacher and student feedback.

As young adults, they have quite strong and well-formulated views on classroom methodology and teacher's attitude. They like group work, pair work, and role play activities where they can express their opinion on something, come to a consensus or don't, and are satisfied when they feel they have been heard. This feeling has been unequivocally expressed over the three years: *In this course we have no fear of making mistakes*. Clearly these students have not had a chance to say anything, not least about what materials/tasks they like and what they would like to learn from that, while they have written innumerable tests and exams, where quantity, not quality is given credit. They show no interest in writing tasks done in class or given as home-work and haven't made much progress, also revealed by test scores.

They like to engage with controversial topics such as gender, environment, generation gap, commonwealth games being organised in India. The teacher needs to find out what is bothering them/uppermost in their mind: *one student who was very shy for a long time opened up when he could complain about the supercilious attitude of the girls in his class!* They find classes *democratic* where everyone gets an equal chance to participate. They find teachers *friendly, supportive, wonderful* because she *concentrates on all students, does not demoralize the weak student*. Some are quite critical: *Teacher xxx should shed her attitude, be punctual and regular*.

They are aware of the injustice meted out to them and react to it quite vehemently, since the course allows them to: when a task required them to complain about wrongly parked cars in the parking area, their first objection was to why cars (which belonged to the rich) should be given the pride of place while bicycles and motorcycles had to make do with the remaining, cramped space. This way they 'sabotaged' the task and justifiably so; the teacher allowed this, since it was still a letter of complaint they were learning to write.

Another challenge the programme faces is the notion of heterogeneity: since the course makes a sincere effort to address learner needs, the task of making it relevant, meaningful and language-rich to everyone is highly demanding. A teacher comments: *Although most students progressed, those who were better than others did not improve to the desired level*, while two students say: *Please increase level of material and difficulty. Handouts are too easy and not much effective*. A diagnostic test at the beginning answers this question to some extent, but the parameters of heterogeneity are far too many

and too complex and defy simple solutions. Here the teacher's sense of plausibility (Prabhu 1987) of judging what works and what doesn't and acting accordingly is being experimented with.

There seem to be two rather distinct roles a teacher plays, one that of a university teacher who essentially lectures and feels that there is no time to do all the activities that may be suggested in the text book or that if s/he talks in English students won't understand since they have low competence; the other where s/he is friendly, patient, waits for even slow learners to respond, and gets them into groups and discusses things *as though s/he is one of them*. It is sometimes intriguing that a teacher wears both hats as one of them admits: *I immensely enjoy teaching something meaningful and useful to the students. In my routine classes the emphasis on improving the English language learning skills is missing. I realize that this is what we should have been doing as teachers of English.* Another teacher comments: *For me, it is entirely different from what we do in our routine classes. I feel that the students on ELPC learn more of language than otherwise.* Similarly students are puzzled: *Why aren't our regular classes interesting? Why can't Sukanya Ma'm (name changed) teach like this?*

University teachers who don't typically get any formal exposure to pedagogy, let alone language pedagogy unlike those at the school level where a pre-service programme is mandatory, are trying to come to grips with substantive issues such as a humanistic approach to teaching, managing classroom activities, reducing teacher-talk and increasing student talk, addressing heterogeneity, making sure everyone goes back satisfied, and so forth. This change seems to be significant when viewed in relation to the traditional method of teaching the prescribed text book with a view to completing the syllabus, regardless of how many come to class or who comes and with what agenda.

Conclusion

The washback of this exercise especially for teachers seems to be positive: we are coming together as a community, and are beginning to speak the language of pedagogy (of possibility). Even the students might learn to break out of the *culture of silence* (Freire 1972) to engage in a dialogue among themselves and with teachers. There are other issues to be addressed: in an effort to make the materials and the approach accessible to larger numbers, we are trying to digitise and upload them on our web-portal. Would this achieve the desired results in terms of developing in learners the ability to negotiate, critique and challenge what they are offered, to the same extent as in a face-to-face engagement? Is a consultative/collaborative mode that we are trying to explore possible?

In conclusion, I would like to propose a note of caution: in my attempt to locate Delhi University's ELPC within a critical pedagogy perspective, I hope I have not told a success story or presented a simplistic representation of the complex forces that underpin an effort at getting off the ground a

seemingly simple English proficiency course. In my view, however, a discussion of the pedagogy of possibility does help us to reassess and reconceptualise taken-for-granted approaches to teaching and learning.

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