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## **Learners' Culture: A Rich Resource for ESL With Relevance to Tribal Learners**

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### **Abstract:**

It is often noted by linguists that language and culture are closely related hence cannot be studied independent of each other. Cultural values are both reflected by and carried through language. It is inevitable that the representation of culture implicitly and explicitly enters into second language education. A vast amount of cultural information is needed for linguistic competence, as acquisition of language remains incomplete without cultural competence. Owing to this fact, the teaching of culture in the second language classroom is important. This research paper is concerned with the teaching of the learners' culture in second language teaching for the Tribal learners. Learners' culture is emphasized here with the view that familiar cultural content in English language teaching in the context of Tribal learners would enhance the learning process, better comprehension and understanding of the content by the learners.

**Keywords: Culturally indigenous study material, Cultural capsule, Cultural assimilation, Multiple Interactive Learning Algorithm.**

### **Introduction**

Learners in Tribal schools understandably are non- native speakers of English and English is a second or third language to them. They are linguistically diverse. Their attitudes towards the target language, culture and their world views directed by their cultural orientations have to be meticulously looked into while teaching and developing teaching materials and designing curriculum. The main concern of this paper would be teaching of learners' culture incorporated with teaching English in Tribal schools. To achieve this end would mean to teach the target language by drawing materials from culturally indigenous materials or culturally familiar content (Byram 1997) like folk tales, folk songs, legends,

myths, dances, festivals, rituals, beliefs, ideologies and so on translated from the Adi-vasi baasha into English and use such material for teaching of English rather than using the English culture material that remain unfamiliar and abstract to the learners. Government run PTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups') schooling system reinforces ethnic minority students' marginalization from mainstream society while placing the tribal students virtually out of reach in academics and public discourses. English language education is a key to social integration and greater opportunities. Thus there is insufficient exploration of pedagogies explicitly meant to indoctrinate a holistic growth in students to negotiate forces of exclusion and marginalization. It was observed over the course of an academic year that methods of education dominated by use of textbooks, memorizing and orientation towards public examinations that did not dispense the recent educational reforms suggesting active learning methods and student-centered curriculum. Though teachers were concerned about high rates of failure for ethnic minority students and attempted to engage students with extra classes, one to one classes and frequent tests, their vision of feasible pedagogical alternatives did not include application oriented approaches that would enhance the student's interest for the second language. The researcher has brought out an innovative teaching methodology by using differentiated time duration of classes, class arrangement, lesson plan and multimodal activities to make the tribal students listen for information, articulate their thoughts and experiences, read on interest and write to communicate.

### **Language learning and Culture**

English in India today, is a symbol of people's aspiration for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. There is no denying of the fact that English language played an important role in the national life of the country. Almost seven decades have passed since India attained independence but no significant improvement is seen in English learning and teaching. English language for its rich vocabulary, elegant style and dignified use, seems to hold the key in every walk of life. No doubt, the first decade of independence witnessed strong opposition to this language from certain sections of society. But English language weathered all storms and emerged as the most important vehicle of inter- state and inter- national communication. English has become the medium of all relevant social interaction. The ability to use English effectively is considered an absolute essential for an honorable existence. In the social, cultural and political life of India, the teeming cream of classes continues to be impressed by English language whereas the ancestral legacy that



contribute to the richness of India's culture and heritage- the primitive tribes of India are devoid of the second language that would take them in a long run in the path of prosperity.

English language teaching and learning situations in tribal schools are even more challenging and do not satiate the nuances of all the four skills of language learning. The tribal schools still follow Grammar translation method which is one of the earliest and most practiced methods. Though it is presently considered to be obsolete in comparison with modern methods, the method still prevails in certain tribal schools in India. The direct method which is also known as natural and psychological method that emphasizes on receptive skills of a language is also being followed. Other teaching methodologies used are Structural-situational method that underpins language as a system of structurally related elements of phonemes and morphemes, Communicative method that aims at developing communicative competence in learners which focuses on the 'register' and the bilingual method in which a second language is taught through mother tongue. These yearlong methodologies though quite familiar have certain conspicuous barriers in teaching tribal students.

Language and culture are inseparable categories. The behaviorists' and the functionalists' idea of culture has commonly been applied in second language classroom teaching practices. The definitions of culture state that language is an integral part of culture or an expression of culture. The knowledge, beliefs, customs, values, practices, rituals, manners, etc. expressed in language become part of a particular culture. Language is not only the essence of defining culture but also manifests it. Thus it is assumed that a language associated with a particular culture cannot be learned in a few lessons of literature, grammar and other teaching material but can be best learned in creating a cultural context in which the teaching of language occurs. For this, incorporation of local cultural components like folk tales, folk songs, legends either written in English or in translation need to be part of the syllabus. Brown (1990) has suggested that learning a second language could be done through the learners' culture as it would make learning easier for the learners.

### **Importance of Culture in Language Teaching and Learning**

The intertwined relationship between language and culture has become a matter of concern for second language teachers and educators. For cultural understanding to take place a synthesis between inputs from learners' home culture and the target language culture have to be incorporated. It is in this point that an attempt may be made to incorporate the learners' cultural components into the second language teaching and learning with the view that

curriculum supports the students' culture and helps them gain cultural awareness, self-confidence, fight ethnocentric attitude and cultivate positive attitude towards other cultures. Therefore lessons should support the students' culture so that teachers can draw attention and create curiosity and creativity in them. The point is that by understanding and appreciating their own culture would not only facilitate the learning process but also help them appreciate the other culture. Ultimately, the learners would be prepared for intercultural learning and communication. Teaching culture in the language classroom would have a tremendous humanizing effect on the learners and the learning process. Teaching culture in the language classroom would help the language learners observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups at the same time help them appreciate the other culture and overcome their prejudices.

### **Techniques for teaching English Language through Culture**

Having considered the above methods, it is known that English language teaching in tribal region needs an incorporated and comprehensive approach to the mindset of the learners. No single method can serve the purpose. What is suitable for an advanced learner may not suit a tribal student for many reasons. The students of the tribal hamlet should be first taught to learn the basic skills of language. It would enable them to have a close communion with the language. (Tayade, 2011)

Language learning is a skill. It is more difficult to teach because language is taught by the use of language itself. Each community has its own idiosyncrasies. Due to the nomadic life style, the tribal are somehow cut off from the mainstream students. They have their own pace and ideologies of learning. The students have their own language problems and this research paper has tried its best to offer some pragmatic solutions to the problems. If it can be given a thought upon and worked on, these so called socially backward can acquire the center than occupying periphery. (Mishra, 2014)

This paper is an outcome of the survey conducted regarding the ELT situation in the Tribal school of Devala. Healthy and congenial atmosphere should be created in the class so that the students develop self-confidence and be inspired to communicate in English. Understanding students' psychology and apprehension of their language should be positively motivated in a language classroom. This can be done by a new method termed as Multiple Interactive Learning Algorithm (MILA), which is successfully used in certain western and Indian



Universities. A simpler form of this innovative methodology can be briefed as target language learning through one's own culture and language.

Language teachers should in the first place make the students aware that there is no such thing as superior or inferior cultures. They need to motivate the students, the language teachers should deal with learners' culture, focusing on its importance and implications in their day to day life. They have to enable learners to learn the target language in their own immediate environment.

### **Authentic materials**

Teaching aids from many different sources such as video clips, recordings of authentic interactions, extracts from television, radio and newspapers, signs, maps and charts, photographs, time tables and songs can be of immense help to the students in broadening their mental image of culture. For instance the Irula 'tene paatu' is also called 'caame okka paatu'. Their cultivation of tene, came, pandi and ragi was a vital aspect of their economy. Due to the predominance of 'tene' and 'came', this song is named as 'tene paatu' or 'came okka paatu'. These millet songs are sung by the Irula men and women while they are sowing, weeding, harvesting and removing millets from harvested fields. This song can be used as a teaching aid. (Dr. Das Pauline 2013)

### **Proverbs**

Proverbs from different tribal groups would be helpful in learning a second language. Through the use of proverbs and phrases as a means to unravel culture would enable the teachers to analyze the stereotypes of culture. Ultimately, it would facilitate the tribal students to explore the values and meanings that are often represented in the proverbs of their own native culture.

### **Folk Tale**

Folktales can form one of the major indigenous components and serve as an integral component of teaching culture in English. It provides a natural environment for discussing cultural similarities and differences, which is crucial for understanding the thoughts of students, improving their language flow, understanding the language structures and meanings. The narrative art promotes the Irula group, feeling of solidarity, maintains conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior, and converts work into play. The Irulas

themselves usually distinguish between two kinds of narratives: 'palame' (oldness, antiquity) and 'parsanga' (narration).

### **Role Play**

Role-playing is one of the ways where learners can get the taste of real culture, for demonstrating emotions and gestures. There are a number of infotainment programmes which are shot with the participation of tribal. But pride of place is given to the Irula news broadcast. Two Irula women, Kali K. and Rangamma M. of Naikkampadi Ooru, do the reporting and news anchoring in the Agali at 6.30 p.m. The same can be enacted in language classrooms.

### **Local literature**

The use of local literature helps students in identifying and realizing the use of language in different communicative contexts. 'Pee paatu' are songs on family deity. 'Pee paatu' literary piece is classified into two kinds on the basis of their contents. One is about deities, and the other about nature.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussions, it is inferred that culture has a vital role to play in second language teaching and learning. As Peck (1998) asserts, culture should be our message to students and language our medium. Learners can be successful in learning the second language only if cultural components are judiciously incorporated into the curriculum. The low literacy rate of Primitive tribes is a serious threat to Indian education. The increase in the number of failures and drop outs in the GTS schools is pointed out as major cause of the fall. A research was carried out in the tribal school of Devala. A sample of 20 tribal learners of the class was chosen for the action research. These students are educated with other non tribal students. A pre- assessment test was conducted on all the four skills. The result analysis was further discussed in the TRC (Tribal Research Centre, Palada). Dr. Udhaya Kumar, Asst. Prof. S. G. of the Research Center supported the research by providing rich resources pertaining to the culture of the tribes. The proposed new pedagogy was handled for grade eight. The time duration for the English class was hundred minutes. The students were made to sit four in a group. Each group had an advanced listener and a team leader who had remarkable leadership qualities. This innovative methodology is an activity



based student- centric teaching-learning methodology, enhancing student participation and motivation inside the classroom. The periodically scheduled continuous internal assessment tests help in identifying and providing special attention to slow learners. This system of teaching which is an activity based learning system comprising of hundred minutes is divided into six segments. This system uses an approach of twenty minutes of teaching time followed by a ten minute activity time which we call it as a cultural capsule, to understand and learn the concept better through the tribal culture. Thus unfamiliar concepts can be taught through familiar culture. It also keeps the brain active throughout the session.

Activities such as jigsaw, POGIL, mind mapping, game based learning, critical pedagogy, peer- led team based learning, role play, spoofing, soapbox, profiling, snake and ladder etc. not only keep the students interested as they use their own culture in foreign language exploration but also help them break down and easily understand the concepts in English language. These activities also prove to be a rigorous internal assessment. The new pedagogy hand in hand with the cultural assimilation will definitely show a remarkable improvement in the tribe students. This method also safeguards the culture and heritage of tribes. The proofs of culture that just remain documented will be taken as rich resources to educate nature's begotten treasures- the tribes.

Having analyzed and identified the problems in language learning in tribal schools, the newly designed methodology was tried in the language classroom. It was found useful, interesting, exciting and enthusiastic. Responses from both students and teachers showed that they had a sanguine opinion toward English culture. They felt that all cultures are equal. Teachers and students equally believed that incorporation of local cultural components in English would empower and strengthen the teaching and learning of English. They acknowledge this methodology, as this approach would not only make the teaching- learning of English exciting but also help them in the long run of mastering the language along with the preservation of the learners' culture. Interactions held with students revealed the desire and aspiration of students to be proficient in English and also preserve and maintain their rich cultural and traditional heritage which were already at stake.

On the basis of the above mentioned observations, it may be concluded that there was already a sense of urgency to revamp the existing English syllabus with inputs from local cultural resources. The responses underline a perspective change in ELT in tribal schools.

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