

INTERVIEW

Textbooks for first generation learners from the marginalised sections of society

(Barun Mishra talked to Prof Janaki Rajan, a Former Director, SCERT, New Delhi about the principles that guided writing of English textbooks for Delhi.)

The creation of the English Elementary Education Series was one of the most challenging tasks we faced at SCERT, Delhi. Until 2004, English was not taught as a subject in the primary schools of the MCD and the



Directorate of Education. We had to prepare the first set of English textbooks as a series for classes I to VIII. Although a policy decision of the government, the decision to introduce English from class I was in itself a controversial one. Many teachers and educationists were of the view that as most of the children in these schools were first generation learners from the marginalised sections of society, emphasis should be on Hindi language teaching. Yet, it was well known that even the poorest of parents preferred to pay fees and send their children to an unrecognised 'teaching shop' rather than to the MCD schools because English was not being taught there.

The English textbook team had additional challenges to face. Many of the ELT series available in India were written for children from the

middle class. Writing textbooks for children of the marginalised sections would require understanding of children, especially first generation learners with little or no supporting home environment for learning English.

Some teachers felt that English in MCD schools must be gradually introduced in a limited and simplified form. This would, however, mean that children from these schools would not be able to acquire English language skills that would help them break the language barrier.

The greatest challenge was to introduce English textbooks in schools where most of the teachers themselves have had no formal training in English language teaching and their own grasp of the language was weak.

While we were mulling over the approach, some fundamental ideas began to take shape:

- Irrespective of the socio-economic background, children did know several English words. A study of vocabulary of 4 year olds in a re-settlement colony in Delhi

revealed that children knew as many as 200 English words, e.g. car, bus, jail, police, signal, road, and so on.

- Languages thrive in the company of each other. There is no reason to believe that as children were learning written Hindi, they would have difficulty in learning spoken and simple written English.
- There is no reason to believe that the principles based on the best of research in learning of language are not applicable to children from marginalised sections of society.
- Children do understand regular and often complex usage of language. Often, language is rendered simplistic for fear of non-comprehension and this introduces an element of artificiality.
- To the best possible extent, children need to be introduced to authentic writings rather than 'lessons' written specifically for a textbook.
- Classes I and II would be viewed as a unit with plenty of scope for questioning, articulations. The conventional approach of introducing the alphabet need not be viewed as the only appropriate approach. Simpler letters of alphabet would be introduced first, such as 'c' or 't' rather than a,b,c,d.
- Illustrations would be integral part of the text, serving to extend the text, strengthen observational and articulation skills.
- Children would be introduced to several genres of English. Apart from the conventional prose and poetry, there would also be newspaper articles, advertisements, jokes, limmeriks, non-sense rhymes;

puzzles, diaries etc. English as it is spoken in different parts of the world-in the Carribean, for instance.

With these ideas in place, the books began to take shape. Several hundred writings from a large variety of sources were collected and graded according to their appropriateness to the age and class of children. Then came the rigorous process of selection of texts. The discussions that took place during these processes merit documentation by themselves.

When the English textbooks reached the schools, the response was mixed. Most teachers did not welcome the class I and II textbooks and preferred to teach just the alphabet. However, those teachers who had some level of proficiency in English were able to use these textbooks very effectively in the classrooms. The children's work based on the primary English textbooks taught by these teachers is proof of the extent to which children learnt effectively based on these approaches, even when the lessons were not 'dumbed' down simply because the children were first generation learners. Policy makers need to ensure that teachers teaching English must have the requisite language proficiency and training if children are to be taught effectively.

One enduring personal memory of the reception of the English textbook relates to a small trial we conducted at Wazirpur. Children here were largely child labourers, engaged in pasting labels for chemicals, among others. When we conducted a class on the lesson Mr. Rabbit from class I textbook for these children aged between 5-7 years, after 30 minutes, the children spontaneously started to say to each other, first, "Hello, Mr. Rabbit" and then, "Hello Mr. Sunil"

(or whatever the child's name was) and shook each other's hands. I asked a child if he had thought that "Hello Mr. Rabbit" was a form of greeting for animals. He responded "Ham buddhu nahi hai", "We are not stupid". This experience has renewed my deep respect for the work of people who have dedicated themselves to writing seriously for children, and the intellectual capabilities of children even from the most deprived of backgrounds.

Within the schools, there had been rich discussions on the pedagogy and content of the textbooks. This has primarily been due to a small, but active and concerned group of teachers with the B. Ed. qualifications and other teachers who are associated with the network of English language teachers in FORTELL, many of whom had been members of the textbook writing team. Their patient engagement with teachers in clarifying the assumptions leading to the fresher research-based approaches to the textbooks have played a valuable role in opinion building of the English series. The teachers, children in MCD and government schools and the SCERT owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

The feedback study on the textbooks conducted by SCERT involving around 15,000 children and 8000 teachers from 200 schools shows that contrary to expectations, the English textbooks have not been rejected by the children or the teachers. Overwhelmingly, teachers have demanded orientation to all the textbooks, and especially, the English textbooks.



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