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PROBLEMS RELATED TO TEACHING/LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

In a complex multilingual and multicultural social setup, language teaching and learning is a multi-dimensional and complicated task. In such a complex linguistic scenario of Manipur, English, even though it is a non-local language, proves to be an acceptable one to all the communities. A large number of factors necessitate English to continue as an important language in Manipur. It is undeniably, but fortunately, a colonial heritage and hence, free from regional biasness. English, being the medium of instruction in education, its importance as a means of communication with the outside world, and understanding of the language by most of the people in the state, it continues to be an important language. Apart from being the medium in which important examinations are conducted, it enables the learners to read a wide range of books and gives them a fair chance to face their counterparts from different states with confidence in the competitive world. Proficiency in this language helps the learners in building up their career by enabling them to read a variety of books written and translated in English. In addition, a good knowledge of English language opens a wider field of opportunities than it could with only the knowledge of regional languages. However, despite the realization of its importance, the extensive and quality teaching and learning of the language is still a big challenge. This paper attempts to highlight some of the issues and problems associated with teaching/learning of English in the state.

Key words: Multilingual setup, Language teaching, Regional language, Problems of teaching / learning English.

Introduction

Manipur is a hilly state in India's North-East, with Imphal as its capital city. It is bounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west. Myanmar lies to the Eastern side of the state. The state covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers and has a population of 28,55,794 (according to 2011 census report), including the Meetei, who are the majority group in the state, Naga, Kuki and Manipuri Pangal (Muslim) people, who speak a variety of Sino-Tibetan languages.

Besides, Nepalis and Marwaris also form a major chunk of the population in the state. The main language of the state is Manipuri (also known as *Meeteilon*). In addition to Manipuri language, some main tribal languages/dialects spoken in Manipur are Tangkhul, Thadou-Kuki, Paite, Kabui, Mao, Hmar, Liangmei, Kom, Lushai, etc. The tribal communities are distinguished by dialects and cultures that are often village-based. Manipur's ethnic groups practice a variety of religions. According to 2011 census, Hinduism is the major religion in the state,

closely followed by Christianity. Other religions include Islam, *Sanamahism*¹, Buddhism, etc.

In Manipur, Manipuri is the predominant language and *lingua franca*. It is the official language in government offices. It is also spoken in the other Indian states of Assam and Tripura, and in Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, it is currently classified as a vulnerable language by UNESCO. It has lexical resemblances to Kuki and Tangkhul Naga. The Manipuri language has been recognized by the Indian union government and has been included in the list of scheduled languages (included in the 8th schedule by the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992). Apart from being a medium of instruction up to the undergraduate level, Manipuri is taught as a subject up to the Post-Graduate and Ph.D. level in some universities in India. Manipur is a place where, in addition to a very rich linguistically diverse landscape, there is Manipuri, English and Hindi used as link language. As a consequence of multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages co-existing in a symbiotic relationship, language contact situation arise where languages tend to influence each others in significant ways.

There is a close affinity between the ELT scenario in India and that of Manipur. Manipuri society, at large, is also a multicultural and multilingual one. In such a complex situation, there arises a need for a common link that can bridge-up all the differences. Though Manipuri is the *lingua franca* in Manipur, several communities' attitudes towards this language is the matter that is to be taken into account. Moreover, the question of common link language is not socially neutral. In a multiple linguistic set up like ours, there is always a possibility of having linguistic tension. Therefore, the analysis of the complex problems concerning society, language and teaching and learning of languages in a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic society like Manipur have great

¹ Sanamahi laining refers to the indigenous peoples' religious belief and practice prevalent since time immemorial. With the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur in the 18th century, it has been affected a lot. Still a large section of the population follows this cultural and religious belief and practice in the state.

theoretical importance in addition to its practical implications.

English language in Manipur is a second language, used as a contact language. It is the language commonly used in seminars, workshops and conferences. In academic or intellectual gatherings, English is preferred for transacting business. In the areas of science and technology, English is used for communication. Considerable use of it is also made on radio, television and computers. Most of our students know the functional value of English. They know that they will have to face the selection committees, interviews etc., in future if they are career-minded. To be able to speak well in English is an advantage for getting a job, promotion and favorable consideration in the corporate world. Those who choose teaching, salesmanship, IT profession, medical representative, law etc. as their career require a good command of English. Students who plan to go outside the state or abroad for higher studies or for jobs realize the importance of spoken English. However, despite the realization of its importance, the extensive and quality teaching and learning of the language is still a big challenge. The question that needs immediate attention is 'Does our education system provides enough opportunities to our students to equip themselves for future needs?'

Methodology

The methodology based on which this study has been carried out is the observation and sample collection of the actual use of the language in the classroom situations and outside the academic campuses by the learners. Examination answer scripts are also checked and assessed for error analysis to see the pattern of error types. Secondary sources relevant to the topic are also used as references.

Problems related to the teaching/learning of English language in Manipur

Phonological problems: English spoken by the Manipuri (Meiteilon) speakers is not always intelligible to the native speakers as well as to the mainland Indians. It is partly because of the mother tongue interference and infrequent use of it outside the school and college premises. It is a second language in their linguistic repertoire, the first being

their respective native dialects. Faulty pronunciation of the sounds of English, replacement of English sounds by their mother tongue equivalents, wrong accentual pattern, leaving important words unaccented in connected speech, faulty division of a long utterance into tone groups, wrong location of nucleus etc. are the main reasons for this unintelligibility. Given below are some of the English sounds, which the Manipuri speakers of English found difficult to pronounce:

(i) The consonant /dz/ is found difficult to pronounce, it is variously replaced by /s/ or /z/ as in words such as *treasure* and *garaze*.

(ii) Fricative categories /ə/ and /ð/ cannot be pronounced clearly and therefore, these sounds are replaced by [th] and [d]. The word 'themselves' is pronounced as 'damselves' and 'they' being misunderstood as 'day'.

(iii) Speakers many a time use unaspirated [p], [t] [k] for aspirated [p^h], [t^h], [k^h] in the beginning of accented syllable. Aspiration is an important feature of English. The word *paper* is pronounced [p^heip] by an Englishman, whereas it is pronounced [pe:pr] by most Manipuri speakers.

(iv) Speakers sometimes substitute /s / for /z/. *House* has /s/ as the final sound whereas *noise* has /z/, though the spelling is identical. The letter 's' is pronounced /s/ in *hopes* but /z/ in *dogs*. The letter 'x' is /ks/ in *expect* but /gz/ in *exact*. Manipuri speakers are used to a "spelling pronunciation". They go by the spelling and use the sound suggested by the spelling. Hence, there is confusion between sounds like /s / and / z / or / ð / and / d /.

(v) Syllable /l, m, n/ are usually replaced by the sequences /əl, əm, ən/.

(vi) Many speakers fail to make clear distinction between /e / and / æ / as in *men* and *man*.

(vii) In R.P. (Received Pronunciation), /r/ occurs only before a vowel. Most Manipuri speakers, however, pronounce it in all positions in words such as *court*, *part*, *father*, etc.

(viii) The following English vowels which do not have equivalents in Manipuri are difficult for a Manipuri speaker to learn:

^: as in *cut*, *come*

eə: as in *air*, *there*

əu: as in *go*, *no*

uə: as in *poor*, *tour*

A common mistake in the pronunciation of these vowel sounds is that the learner uses a sound, which is its nearest counterpart in Manipuri. For example, the learner may pronounce *girl* as /garl/; *flower* as /flawar/; or *poor* as /pu:r/.

(ix) Most Manipuri speakers find the suprasegmental features of English very difficult. Their accentual patterns are often faulty. Very often, they place the accent on the wrong syllable of a word. Unlike in English, difference of stress does not lead to difference of meaning in Manipuri. Therefore, learning the appropriate stress of English words may become difficult to the Manipuri students. In English, stress changes according to function of the words. For example, in English words stress in the initial position 'subject and 'object indicates the words to be *noun* or *adjective*, whereas stress in the middle position like sub'ject and ob'ject indicates the words to be *verb*.

(x) Manipuri speakers of English also commit mistakes of intonation. They fail to divide a long utterance into tone groups and often misplace the nucleus or the tonic syllable.

The given above are a few notable phonological problems which the Manipuri speakers of English find difficult to cope up.

Communication and linguistic problems:

The ultimate goal of English language teaching/learning is to develop the learners' communicative competence, which will enable them to communicate successfully in the real world. Communicating successfully refers to passing on a comprehensible message to the listeners. According to Canale (1983), "Communicative competence comprises of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence". Communication is an important area of difficulty that Manipuri learners of English have. They find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language. This may be due to the methods of language teaching and the learning environment, which may be said to be inconvenient for learning a foreign language. This fact is clearly noticeable in Manipur because the formal language of communication is Manipuri or tribal dialects. When engaged in authentic communicative

situations in English, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get to communicate their meaning. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period.

For language learners to use the language more successfully, they should be involved in real life situations. However, unfortunately, in our social context, English is used only as an academic subject when it is taught in a school or a college or in the university. Without practice, English or any other language cannot be acquired. English language department graduates even do not have enough practice in English; they use Manipuri most of the time even after becoming English language graduates. They use English only when they encounter a situation where they are obliged to use it English as a medium of communication. It may be noted that for mastering any language practice is very important. Halliday (1984) suggests that:

Oral mastery depends on practicing and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language. It is the most economical way of thoroughly learning a language.... When one has such a control of the essentials of a language, he can almost automatically produce the usual patterns of that language.

This shows the importance of using the target language in language teaching/learning. However, in actual practice such things do not happen. The students in Manipur, for example, learn English in their native place, where the native language is Manipuri or other tribal dialects (in hill areas). The only way to learn English is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Manipuri. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language because it is not used in daily life situations.

The weakness of English language learners in general, and English language department graduates more specifically, has been attributed to various factors. Some of these problems include difficulties to comprehend structural difference between English and Manipuri (for instance, English

has the sentence pattern 'subject + (auxiliary) + (tense) + lexical verb + object', whereas Manipuri has the pattern 'subject + object + lexical verb + (auxiliary) + (tense)' [categories in the parenthesis are optional]) and lack of knowledge on the part of learners when they join for higher studies. The school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of target language environment and the learners' motivation towards the language etc. are the other related issues. Therefore, these things need to be paid more attention.

Lack of emphasis on spoken English:

In the academic curriculum at the school and undergraduate levels, no provision is made for spoken English as a distinct language skill to be taught to the students. For example, the syllabus design totally avoids the component of spoken English emphasizing only the writing and reading skills. In the syllabus there is no 'correlation' or 'horizontal integration' of the different language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Textbooks are produced accordingly. Thus, lack of provisions for spoken English in the curriculum, in the textbooks or in the teaching materials, is the first deterrent factor that has relegated the teaching or learning of spoken English. In testing and evaluation also, there is not much scope is given for testing the student's competence in this area. This is so because the syllabus is totally reticent about this important language skill. Thus, the teacher and the taught are in no way obliged to consider spoken English as an essential component of teaching or learning English.

Grammatical or syntactic problems:

(i) At the syntactic level, the learners commit variety of mistakes while writing extensive complex and compound sentences, which contains many subordinate and principal clauses, conjunctions and complements of subjects and objects. In such constructions, often, subject and verb disagree, and sentences are left incomplete.

Example: *The flight, which was supposed to arrive at 2 p.m. at Imphal airport late by 30 minutes and created inconveniences to the passengers.*

(ii) Students paid not much attention to the grammatical norms. A commonly found mistake

among the school children while writing sentences, which contain modals, is that without paying any attention they write second or third form of the verb after the modals.

Example: The mathematician could not even *solved* this difficult sum.

(iii) Verbs after third person singular numbers are often written without -s or -es.

Example: It is Johnny, who *win* first prize in the essay writing competition.

(iv) In the interrogative sentences, verbs after 'do', 'does' and 'did' are written in past form.

(v) The difference between infinitive 'to' and preposition 'to' is unclear.

(vi) Prepositions are generally used at the wrong place in the construction. Sometimes prepositions are omitted where necessary, and inserted where unnecessary.

Example: (i) You should pray God daily. (ii) The girl resembles *to* her mother.

(vii) Some words like *scenery, information, furniture, hair, brick, advice, administration*, etc. have no plural suffix, but the students used to write them in plural form with -s suffix.

(viii) Misuse of adjectives is a common feature.

Example: (i) It is *more preferable than* that. (ii) His *economical* condition is bad.

(ix) Adverbs are inserted where unnecessary.

Example: You should not continue the work *any longer*.

(x) Repetition of same ideas by different words.

Example: The committee at last came to *a final conclusion*.

(xi) Unsuitable words are used in idioms. Example: Copy this poem word *to* word.

(xii) Transformation of sentences is a difficult area for most students. They committed a number of mistakes in this area.

Problems in learning verb phrase in English: Tense and aspect are the problematic areas and among the different sub-categories of verb phrase, these two account for the highest number of errors committed by the learners of English as second/foreign language in India (Marwein, 1977; Bakshi, 1978; Parasher, 1977). The auxiliary system of any language is important; however, each language has its own auxiliary system. The structure of the verbal

group in English and Manipuri is different. Therefore, many errors committed in the use of auxiliaries by the Manipuri learners of English can be explained in terms of *mother tongue interference*. The English verbal group has the structure '(modal) + (tense) + lexical verb + aspect' and the Manipuri verbal group has the structure 'Lexical verb + (modal) + aspect + (tense)' [The categories in the bracket are optional].

The errors related to the auxiliary can be divided into different sub-groups depending upon the specific type of error. The headings given below include many different sub-groups listed by Richards (1971).

1. Omission of auxiliary; 2. faulty insertion of auxiliary; 3. wrong form of verb after auxiliary; 4. wrong use of modals; 5. perfective aspect instead of past simple; 6. present/past simple instead of perfective form; and 7. progressive aspect instead of present simple.

Examples:

1(a) Bir Tikendrajit and Thangal General *hanged* by British; (b) This year many students *giving* MBBS/BDS entrance exam.

2(a) Violence *is always* disturb human rights; (b) I *was joined* B.A. in the year 2009.

3. Small boys and girls *are attracting* by commercial films.

4(a) Elders *will* always say that unity is strength; (b) Some experience *will be* shocking but enlightening as well.

5. I *had passed* my B.A. exam in 2006.

6. We *prepare* the lunch before the guest arrived.

7. Every year students *are coming* here for excursion.

These and similar problems are common in learning English verb phrase and it can be further explained that the Manipuri verb inflects for its tense, number, gender and person, whereas in English they can be lexicalized separately. Thus, the English auxiliaries serving as markers of tense and aspect, and of negative and the interrogative, appear difficult and confusing to Manipuri learners of English. Hence, when confronted with a system different from their mother tongue, the learners commit mistakes in writing English sentences.

Lack of training facility for teachers: Teachers are the facilitators of linguistic skills to their students in the schools and colleges. The teachers of English all over the state do not have the opportunity of undergoing the training necessary in this regard. They speak English according to their own individual backgrounds and tastes, which are variegated, and their students also develop their own varieties of spoken English. Further, the input capacity of training institutes like the CIEFL or RIE is very limited (Unfortunately, there is no RIE in Manipur). Only a few teachers can have the privilege of undergoing training, but most of them lapse into their old ways of teaching once they go back to their institutions after the training.

Lack of equipment and infrastructure: Teaching spoken English requires some equipment like a tape recorder, if not a full-fledged language laboratory. The teacher should be provided the necessary equipment along with cassettes to be used in the classroom. However, this is almost impossible in our local institutional milieu. Thus, a teacher who attempts to teach spoken English through practice is rendered helpless and he cannot proceed ahead with his plan. Moreover, considering the shortage of fund in the education sector in the state, the department concerned cannot manage the necessary equipments.

Socio-cultural problems: The Manipuri students who study English in the schools and colleges came from different social and family backgrounds. A good number of them also came from the disadvantaged sections of the society. Classes are not in a homogeneous group and therefore, the teacher cannot do justice to all groups of students in his/her class. The teacher may overcome this problem to some extent by dividing his class into smaller groups based on the students' previous exposure to the language during entry level and by giving practice according to his/her previous exposure. However, this is not practically feasible due to lack manpower (human resources).

Conclusion

Keeping in view of the roles played by English in Manipuri Society, greater efforts should be made to spread and develop the teaching and learning of English. The methods use, materials

available and the facilities provided for ELT in the state are to be improved. They need to be checked, revised and reformed according to the needs and requirements of its learners. A proper language planning is also required, in which English sustains rather than destroys the multilingual and multicultural ethos. While doing so a complete overhaul must be considered so that there should be a strict adherence to the medium of instruction at all stages of education. A well-organized policy that aims at inculcating a love and respect for all language - regional, national and international must be chalked out.

Despite having a stronghold and introduced the language from the primary stage itself in the state, the learners are still facing numerous problems. Problems like lack of fluency in spoken English due to its random use in the social context, mother-tongue interference, unable to classify individual sounds of English, grammatical mistakes in writing and lack of trained and efficient teachers to guide the students etc., are but a few worth mentionable here. Moreover, the aimless drift in academic programmes, caused by the absence of clearly defined objectives and well-conceived policies with regards to English studies has resulted to an undesirable deterioration of the standard of English. The major cause for such a situation to have grown up, as a consequence, is the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of our teaching and learning programmes in the field to meet the needs and challenges of the current trend. In the current context, English plays an important role in the modernization of education system in the state and it may increase manifold in the years to come. Hence, English in the state has a very bright prospect. However, despite having such popular and gradual realization, the extensive reach of English among the students in the state is still a problem, especially in remote hilly terrains and rural areas. Therefore, what is needed at this hour is serious rethinking of the entire English language teaching and learning scenario in the state.

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