



TEACHERS' CULTURAL BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES: WHY THEY REALLY MATTER?

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Article Info:

Received:14/8/2013
Accepted on:25/09/2013
Available online:30/9/2013

ABSTRACT

Teacher cultural beliefs and attitudes are an important and inseparable component of teacher education courses. The aim of the study is to find out the same in APSWREIS (Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutes). How does teacher's cultural background and his/her beliefs and attitudes, self-efficacy and subject knowledge affect students? The quality and character of teacher education is determined in large part by programmes that aim to develop, enhance and improve the knowledge already in possession of teachers. Teacher Development Programmes (TDP) eventually determine the quality of teachers who actively teach in the classroom.

The present study drew its inspiration from TDPs across the globe where teachers master new techniques and put them into practice in classrooms. There were diverse discussions pertaining to the problems faced by the student - teacher community at APSWREIS. Many a participants at the TDPs mentioned about student-centered learning and the problems that they encountered, mainly in large classes.

The aim of the study is to find out the support needs of second language teachers' in APSWREIS (Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutes). How does teacher's cultural background and his/her beliefs and attitudes, self-efficacy and subject knowledge affect students achievement in a language classroom?

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an "integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000). How culture influences his/her attitudes, once teacher practicing veganism, fruitarianism. It determines limited sources in the

field of knowledge. This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture. Teacher has to draw attention through learners needs and culture can be taken into consideration. However language makes up one's mind to acquire a language from beginning to end a culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes.

It is an acknowledged fact that the four basic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing are absolutely essential for anyone to acquire mastery in the target language. Does cultural knowledge really help one to acquire a second language effectively? Effective learning of a second language requires suitable teaching methods and

materials to equip teachers with these skills and train them in becoming successful teachers of language. However in the context of Andhra Pradesh, we have special schools for underprivileged children. My main intention is to develop a special methodology for special schools such as APSWREIS. If there are special schools for regional medium socially, economically disadvantaged learners. But it doesn't have special methodology for these schools. It is also evident that in the language learning process, teaching strategies play an important role in deciding the ease with which teachers acquire target language. However, the teachers needs have to be taken into account while making decisions regarding the strategies we use in the classroom.

"The ways in which children communicate in their home cultures are critical to the development of written language models of reading and writing. The home language of students provides the foundation for the emergence of reading and writing behaviors. If there is a mismatch between the structures, values and expectations of the home language and school language, children may be at a disadvantage for success in early reading tasks, and thus spend their entire school careers attempting to catch up (Gay, 1988; Snow, 1992).

Teaching of English looks pathetic when we relate it to the fact that the needs of learning a language have been different in different situations. However, most of the learners needs are not catered to in our educational set up. Most teachers are more interested in covering portions than teaching language. Their concern for high marks and the examination-oriented approach makes the class monotonous and boring. Students memorize the lessons from market guides without proper understanding and manage to get high marks.

Students of APSWREIS are usually first generation learners. They come from very poor socio-economic background. These unprivileged children's parents are non-literate. They are not familiar with the script of their own mother tongue. One can imagine the difficulties with learning a second language, whose guidelines to learn are also given in English. Most of the children come from a rural background. They don't have any exposure to English at home.

The present study intends to examine the problems of teacher's with a special focus on teachers cultural beliefs and attitudes.

The proposed study assumes significance in the light of the fact that students from schools such as APSWREIS normally fare poorly in English Language Tests. The following could be the reasons for this:

- ❖ Lack of Exposure to the target language: Lack of environment where the language can be used.
- ❖ Inappropriate methods and techniques: Paraphrasing/translating texts by teachers.

This study raises certain important questions and seeks the answers. These questions are:

- Is there any special methodology for these special schoolteachers?
- What are the problems faced by the teachers? How does caste culture influence the teaching and learning of language?
- How does socio-linguistics support the teachers' need to provide help to the learners to overcome their problems? How do teachers cope with these problems in other contexts?
- Can the learners' strategies define "an adequate theory of learning?"
- How far is it true that our students are actually doing something very different from what we assume that they are doing?

These problems could be investigated further.

The major reasons: The teacher a lack of proficiency in the language and inadequate training in the teaching of English. If teacher training programmes are to meet the needs of the situation more realistically, they should perform a dual role; improve the proficiency of teachers effectively as well as their teaching abilities. The study also examines the problems of in-service teachers, training programmes for teachers of English in the light of the current theories of second language learning and current approaches to the teaching of English through socio-linguistic theories.

Why really matters?

Students fail because the teachers either do not understand, or identify the needs of the students' requirements. Most of the teachers underestimate the learners' abilities. Teachers always worry about syllabus. Students fail because they have limited English vocabulary. Students fail

because some English skills are not practiced in the real life situation. Students rely on “market guides” memorization of questions and answers rather than real skills. Students fail because they become upset and cannot perform for the lack of proper motivation and support. To pass the students need the four English basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). There isn’t a proper testing system on listening and speaking. It is the most neglected area in the school secondary education.

Teachers’ Attitudes and Beliefs

To understand the teaching learning environment in the APSWREIS it was also a necessary to interact with the teachers and the other administrative staff to get an idea of their opinions and views related to teaching/learning process. Therefore the next step in phase II consisted of the interviews and questionnaires with the teachers and the other staff. We start with a teacher profile and then go on to report the data from the questionnaires.

The researcher also had the opportunity to attend one of the training programmes organized for the teacher this training programme was organized by local teachers from one of the universities nearby. Though the components of the workshop were planned with their usefulness to teachers in mind the way these components were handled in the classroom left a lot to be desired. Therefore it was noticed the teachers were not really interested in the programme and attended it mechanically because they had to. Teachers were also of the opinion that these training programmes should be conducted by professionals who are trained for the job, and done in a more systematic manner.

The teachers at APSWREIS school bring with them, rich experience and expertise in handling students. Around 50% of the teachers have 5-7 years experience in residential schools. Some of them have received training in CIEFL. Many of the teachers were keen on receiving training at CIEFL to enhance their knowledge of teaching and methodology.

An informal interview was held with teachers following which they were administered a questionnaire.

The objectives of the questionnaire was to get additional information regarding the teaching

learning environment in the schools to supplement the data already gathered in the classroom.

Information regarding the problems encountered by students, the learning atmosphere in the school, pedagogical problems, infrastructural facilities etc. was gathered from the perspective of the teachers and other staff in the school. As already described, the questionnaire had 20 questions all related to the teaching-learning environment. The data gathered through the questionnaires is presented below in 6 thematic sections

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1. Problems related to teaching,
2. Problems related to time and classroom management.
3. Problems related to vocabulary, reading and writing
4. Problems related to learners
5. General problems related to infrastructural facilities
6. Teacher training

1. **Problems related to teaching:** there were 5 questions related to teaching. In response to question No.1 most teachers seem to have a problem in implementing suggested techniques in the classroom. This was not because they were not trained as teachers but seem to lack the awareness of related background knowledge to implement these techniques. As regards using the bilingual method in the classroom most teachers expressed the view it was not a major problem, and seem to be comfortable with

the bilingual method of teaching. Some even expressed a preference for this method of teaching. As far as the third question on grammar was concerned their seemed to be a 50% agreement and 50 % disagreement. Only 5 teachers strongly, disagree with the statement. Interestingly contrary to the common argument in second language research that group learning facilitates second language acquisition, most teachers in the APSWREIS do not agree with this statement. Apart from a disbelief in using groups for facilitating language acquisition they also seem to have a reservation for group work, as it demanded more classroom management skills. Similarly responding to the last question in the section related to the teaching of the skills and elements of language i.e. vocabulary and grammar, most teachers disagree with the statement that the elements were easier to teach than the skills. However, very often it was noticed that teachers were comfortable translating texts in the classroom, and made no attempt to teach either skills or elements.

Problems related to teaching

- ✓ Teacher does not have adequate training to implement the suggested techniques
- ✓ Preference for bilingual method in teaching
- ✓ Teachers think that grammar is the most important in learning languages
- ✓ Teachers do not think that students can learn English when they work in groups
- ✓ It is easy to teach grammar or vocabulary compared to teaching speaking /writing

2. **Problems related to time and classroom management:** there were 7 questions related to time and classroom management. The first question related to the duration of subjects in the classroom, and most teachers agreed that 45 minutes is too short a time to carry out activities such as pair and group work. Further

teachers are of the view that with a syllabus to complete and the examinations looming large, there is only time for examination oriented teaching and with the huge class size there is no time for group work or pair work or the preparation of special material. This is the reason why most of the teachers also tended to agree with the next question related to following suggested techniques in the classroom. They seem to think that the syllabus did not permit them to try out the suggested techniques in the classroom. Similarly most of them have no doubt that their classes and teaching are examination oriented. However most teachers were of the view that the school administration did not because problems as far as pair work and group work were concerned. The large class size seemed to be one of the major reasons why teachers did not engage the class in-group or pair work activities. Most teachers agree the large class size does not permit them to engage in such activities; however the next response indicates that this has nothing to do with the arrangement of desks in the classroom.

Problems relating to time and class room management

- ✓ 45 minutes is too short to carry out pair/group activities
- ✓ The Syllabus is very vast that teachers cannot complete if they follow the suggested techniques in the text books
- ✓ It is class or examination oriented / result oriented
- ✓ School administration does not like when students work in pairs/ groups and make noise
- ✓ Large number of the students in a class
- ✓ Seats are not suitable for pair work (they are fixed)

3. **Problems related to vocabulary, reading and writing:** As far as the teaching activities are concerned in the classroom, questions were asked related to the methodology followed and the activities that were done in the classroom. As indicated in the table and the following graph (fig.5), responses

to question no.1 show that most teachers use this strategy very rarely. They resorted to translation most of the time. Similarly activities such as *fill in the blanks* or *matching exercises* where students were required to work independently were not given enough time in the classroom. Further very few teachers encourage students to guess the meaning of words using synonyms, antonyms etc. even in cases where activities was possible. The last two questions on writing show that teachers made students do these activities only sometimes in the classroom. However it was noticed that these activities were not done at all in the classroom during the time that the researcher was present. The graph below gives an idea of the kind of activities that teachers preferred doing in the classroom. However though the graph indicates that about 10 to 60 percentage of teachers said that they did such activities like *translation, fill in the blanks and guessing the contextual meaning* in the classroom, in reality only 20% of teachers actually did these activities in the classrooms.

- ✓ Problems related to vocabulary, reading and writing
- ✓ Explaining the meaning of the words through definitions, illustrations
- ✓ Translating into Telugu
- ✓ Making students do activities such as fill in the blanks, matching etc.
- ✓ Encouraging students to guess the meaning of words using clues such synonyms, antonyms etc.
- ✓ Reading aloud and explaining the idea so that students do the exercises without difficulty
- ✓ Making students read silently and do the exercise first individually and then compare with their partners
- ✓ Making students write personal letters or diaries
- ✓ Making students write paragraphs on their area of interest
- ✓ Making students write paragraphs on given topics

4. **Problems related to learners:** There were five questions related to students' problems in the classroom. These ranged from questions of general interest to specific problems related to different aspects of language. Most teachers felt that students like the tasks in the textbooks. There seemed to be no problem in their willingness to take part in pair and group work activities. They also seemed to be aware that they learn language through such activities. However most teachers were of the view that students prefer grammar and vocabulary in the classroom. According to the teacher the students had no motivation to do other activities in the classroom. However it was noticed that was most students were willing to learn English by speaking in English among themselves and appeared motivated in doing activities related to language learning.

Problems related to learners

- ✓ Students do not like the activities in the text books
- ✓ Students are not willing to participate in pair/group work (they fear to talk in front of others)
- ✓ Students do not think that they learn English when they do pair/group work
- ✓ Students prefer teacher's explanation to doing the activities themselves.
- ✓ Students have no motivation to learn English
- ✓ Students prefer grammar and vocabulary exercises to improve their English proficiency

5. **General problems related to infrastructural facilities:** The next section in the questionnaire related to infrastructural facilities in the school. Though facilities such as library, computer lab, and audio video materials are available in the school, most teachers do not use them. There seemed to be a general lack of awareness in the way such facilities can be used in the English classroom. It seemed that there was no orientation to help teachers use these facilities in the classroom. Even the use of the library was rather restricted. The library

was accessed only in the given hour and teachers did not use any materials from the library in the classroom. Even dictionaries readily available in the library were not used. The management organized regular training sessions for the teachers every year. But most teachers were rather skeptical about the kind of training received in the training programme.

General Problems related to Library, Computer lab, Teacher Training Programmes.

- Do you use computer lab, audio, video materials in the English classroom
- Are you using library general magazines like Champak, Chandama and Wisdom
- Do you think that you got adequate training on LSRW from the workshop

6 Training Programme

- ✓ Training was short
- ✓ the training programme did not focus on LSRW Methodology
- ✓ Resource persons were not very effective/competent
- ✓ Specify other problems...

With reference to the training programme, 64% of the teachers felt that the training programmes were of short duration, 48% of them felt that the training programme did not focus on LSRW methodology, 56% of them felt that resource persons were not very effective/competent. 32% felt that the methodology was not attractive. 36% felt that resource persons were very effective. 36% did not respond to description of the training period. 20% did not respond to the focus of the training programme, 8% did not respond to inputs of the resource persons. The analysis indicates that a majority wanted a change in the training programme. Those who did not respond formed a small number.

The researcher also had the opportunity to attend one of the training programmes organised for the teachers. This training programme was organised by local teachers from one of the universities in the neighborhood. Though the components of the workshop were planned with their usefulness to teachers in mind the way these components were handled in the classroom left a lot to be desired. Therefore it was noticed that teachers were not really interested in the programme and

attended it mechanically because they had to. Teachers were also of the opinion that these training programmes should be conducted by professionals who are trained for the job, and done in a more systematic manner.

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