



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL MATERIAL FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF ENGLISH WITH
REFERENCE TO SCHOOLS IN NAGALAND

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ABSTRACT

The underlying principle for developing culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English at the middle school level in Nagaland is that it would help the learners learn English as a second language in the context of the learners' own cultural experience. It is believed that themes familiar to the learners would facilitate the learners to learn better, the reason being that any new learning is in one way or the other influenced by previous experience and therefore learning a language in a situation away from learners' context and experience would be less motivating and irrelevant. Culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English are required if at all the curriculum is to be socially and culturally sensitive however, should not be narrowed down to local materials alone but incorporate materials from other sources which are relevant.

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INTRODUCTION

Developing culturally indigenous material for effective teaching of English as a second language in schools with special reference to the middle school level in Nagaland is imminent from the following perspectives. Nagaland is a small state situated in the North Eastern part of India. There are sixteen major tribes along with other sub-tribes. These tribes, with a population of 19, 88,636 as per the 2001 Census, are spread over to eleven districts of the state. The sixteen major tribes are Angami, Ao, Chang, Chakhesang, Khamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchungrii, Zeliang, Kachari and Kuki. They have an affinity with the Indo-Mongoloid race and their languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman or Sino-Tibetan language family. Historically, Nagaland is the home of the Nagas as the state is predominantly inhabited by them since time immemorial with some migrant communities who are of recent arrivals sharing a common culture and tradition. Hutton and other anthropologists take note of the Naga cultural identity supposedly definable in a cohesive manner with exception to some migrant communities coming from outside of the state (Hutton 1920, 1926, 1965 cited in K.S. Singh *et al* ed. 1994:1).

It is a known fact that Nagas are distinct from the rest of the Indians in terms of race, language, religion, history, and other social and cultural practices. K.S. Singh *et al* have stated that "...of all the states in India, Nagaland enjoys a unique position particularly because it is pre-dominantly inhabited by a people who are ethno-culturally so identical, particularly in terms of their socio-political system, uni-ethnic settlement pattern, common house and dormitory types, their identical dress and ornaments, food habits, kinship institutions, means of livelihood, customs and laws. No non-Naga community in Nagaland has considerably contributed towards cultural development and social formations in the state; though some of them such as the Kachari tribe had played significant historical roles. The contributions of non-Naga and contemporary migrant communities in Nagaland are witnessed only in the economic sphere. Ethno-historically and culturally, Nagaland emerges as a Naga culture area" (Singh *et al* ed. 1994: 45-46). As it is evident from the above description, we have reasons to say that Nagaland is ethno-historically a Naga culture zone sharing common social and political set up. This is true under the generic term 'Naga' in the sense that the Nagas in the state of Nagaland in particular and elsewhere in general share similar physical features, food habits, customs and laws, dress and ornaments, folk-dance and songs, stories, kinship-institutions, common dormitory system, animist beliefs, rituals and festivals, and so on. Although, there are variations in some

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of the social and cultural practices among the tribes however, these variations do not make any difference but rather add to the beauty of the diversity of practices. Therefore, it may be argued here that since the different tribes in Nagaland share similar cultural and traditional practices with exception to few immigrants evolving a culturally sensitive teaching material would be viable and workable.

Culturally indigenous material

The rationale for developing culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English at the middle school level in Nagaland is that it would help the learners to learn the second language in the context of the learners' own culture and experience. It is believed that themes familiar to the learners would facilitate the learners to learn better, the reason being that any new learning is influenced by previous experience and therefore learning a language in a situation away from learners' context and experience would be less motivating and irrelevant. Culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English are required if at all the curriculum is to be socially and culturally sensitive. In this context, the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) in its *National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document*, (NCERT 2000:6) has explicitly pointed out the purpose of curriculum development in these words: "Curriculum must meet the learners' needs, societal expectations, community aspirations, and international comparisons." With regard to traditional curriculum practice prevailing in India, the NCERT has underlined its irrelevance and hollowness as it is an imitation of the Western ideas. It is blindly applied in India as "Education in general, and the process of curriculum development in particular, in many of those developing countries which not long ago were part of the colonial rule, even now continue to be strongly influenced by the vestiges of the past. In practical terms it means copying en masse the ideas generated in the western countries and then their blind application in entirely different contexts" (NCERT *ibid.*:9-10). The NCERT calls for meaningful education and for that to happen the curriculum should relate to the socio-cultural context of the learners as it states, "Education in order to be relevant and meaningful should relate to the socio-cultural context of the pupil" (NCERT *ibid.*:10). The NCERT further observes that an indigenous curriculum would meet the socio-cultural needs of the learners by incorporating into the curriculum the indigenous knowledge and wisdom and expresses its concern for the lack of it as "...an indigenous curriculum would celebrate the ideas of native thinkers such as Aurobindo, Gandhi, Tagore and Krishnamurthy to name a few of them. It would also rest on innovative experiments and experiences which have emanated from its own context. Against this background it may also be pointed out that there is a need to bring to notice the contribution of India to the world wisdom. Paradoxical as it may sound, while our children know about Newton they do not know about our own Aryabhat, they do know about a computer but do not know about the concept of zero. Mention may also have to be made for instance of Yoga and Yogic practices as well as Indian system of medicines like Ayurvedic and Unani forms which are being recognised and practised all over the world. The curriculum shall have to correct such imbalances" (NCERT *ibid.*: 9-10).

The NCERT calls for indigenous knowledge to be incorporated in curriculum for it is recognised by the world community that indigenousness is not opposed to the flow of new ideas that come from different cultures and cultural contexts. "Today there is world-wide recognition of the indigenous knowledge system...Indigenousness, however, is not opposed to being receptive to new ideas from different cultures and cultural contexts. Indigenousness, to make it clear, is as opposed to the narrow nationalism as to the false universalism" (NCERT *ibid.*: 9-10). In fact, as stated above, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and materials in curriculum is the need of the hour and should be implemented with right earnestness. The NCERT although underlines the need of indigenous curriculum in the context of India in general, however, a curriculum of such nature is the urgent need in the context of Nagaland in particular.

When the goals and objectives of curriculum development are to meet the learners' needs, societal expectations, community aspirations, and international comparisons then the teaching approach, materials and pedagogy should be directed toward learner-specific and culture-specific requirements. This would mean, in other words, that a curriculum should be designed in congruence with the people and culture of the region to meet their needs and expectations. This type of curriculum framework is urgently needed in a pluralistic country than in a homogenous country. In this perspective, the NCERT has rightly pointed out of such a need in a multicultural, multilingual and multireligious country like India "India is a multicultural, multilingual and multireligious society. Every region and state has its typical identity. This would have implications for pedagogical approaches to be followed in different context. Internationally, pedagogy is perceived not merely as a science of instruction but as a culture or as a set of sub-cultures which reflect different contexts and different teaching behaviours-inside and outside classrooms. The plural nature of Indian society needs to be reflected in the pedagogical approaches. Since there is no one universal way in which the children learn, there is a strong need for looking into the cultural context in which a child is placed. A child in a tribal society may process information in an altogether different manner as compared to the one from the urban areas and high socio-economic stratum. Pedagogy, therefore, should be culture specific. Instead of using one uniform, mechanistic way of student learning, cultural practices such as story-telling, dramatics, puppetry, folk-play, community living, etc. should become a strong basis of pedagogy. Cultural specificity should get embedded in the pedagogical practices which should be evolved for tribal, rural, urban and other ethnic groups and communities" (NCERT *ibid.*:18).

The above quoted statement implies that using culture-specific pedagogy, indigenous curriculum in context (tribal, rural, urban, ethnic groups and communities) should be implemented throughout the country. In the case of Nagaland, with its unique cultural identity and history from the rest of the country, it is justifiable to have a curriculum with indigenous material instead of following the uniform national curriculum. As mentioned above, there is no one single way of learning or acquiring knowledge, as each society or community follows a different way of processing thought or information. Following

this premise, it is inevitable that curriculum and pedagogy should be contextually evolved for each tribe or community, rural or urban, and other ethnic groups so as to enhance effective teaching and learning of English as a second language in India. To incorporate such type of culturally sensitive materials into the curriculum, the role of both teachers and learners is considered paramount besides other stakeholders, policy makers, syllabus designers and experts in curriculum planning and development.

Culturally sensitive material

Andrian Holliday in his article "Achieving Cultural Continuity in Curriculum Innovation", in David R. Hall and Ann Hewings ed. *Innovation in English Language Teaching: A Reader* (2001) underlines an important point in curriculum innovation when he talks about the need for "cultural continuity" restating Jacob's theory (1996) in curriculum innovation. The term "cultural continuity", according to him, means to be sensitive to the cultural needs of the learners, teachers or stakeholders, as he states "to be sensitive to the cultural expectations of the 'recipients' of innovation, whether they be students or teachers encountering new teaching methodologies, or stakeholders in curriculum projects" (2001:169-76). He further argues that the notion of "cultural continuity" can be achieved when meaningful bridges are built between the culture of the innovation and the traditional expectations of the people with whom we work. Holliday concludes his article with a sort of warning to the curriculum developers, experts and stakeholders saying that "We must come to terms with the fact that our discourse makes us see others in our own terms, and not in theirs. We must not be naïve to assume that technologies of investigation, evaluation, quality control and management created within our own discourses are equally meaningful to other people. We must come to terms with the fact that the bridges we build to reach other cultures might only be meaningful to our culture" (2001:169-76). He is also critical about the concept of learner-centeredness and stakeholder-centeredness arguing that these concepts are products of our own discourses, and may not belong to the differently constructed worlds of those we wish to reach. What is required of us is to look deeply and critically at our own discourses before judging those of others. McKay and Heng state that English as an international language (EIL) taught throughout the world but effective teaching pedagogy could be arrived at only when local language needs and local culture of learning, learners' background are given due respect and importance. An appropriate EIL pedagogy should encourage English bilingualism and respect the variety of Englishes being used today across the globe and, according to them, this would help bring down the global and local tension and reduce the notion of "othering" that exists in EIL pedagogy today. "Our basic assumption throughout the book is that, because English is an international language, effective pedagogical decisions and practices cannot be made without giving special attention to the many varied social contexts in which English is taught and learned. An appropriate EIL pedagogy is one that promotes English bilingualism for learners of all backgrounds, recognizes and validates the variety of Englishes that exists today, and teaches English in a manner that meets local language needs and respects the local culture of learning. It is

our hope that by enacting such a pedagogy, EIL educators can mitigate local and global tensions and reduce the Othering that currently exists in EIL pedagogy" (McKay and Heng 2008:197-8). Ian McGrath (2002: 106) has given eight factors for selection of authentic texts of which relevance, intrinsic interest of topic/theme and cultural appropriateness are mentioned. McGrath asserts that relevance and interest are relative and these two have to be there in the text. Relevance is the main thing as he says, "Relevance is a *sine qua non*." He argues that however interesting a text may be of topic, genre or linguistic features if its use cannot be justified on the grounds of relevance it should never be used at all. By intrinsic interest he means that if a text perceptibly does not interest the learners however relevant it may be, it does not hold much water. To him, relevance and interest are what we might call as two sides of the same coin and he calls for ingenuity in the presentation and exploitation of the text. Cultural appropriateness in materials preparation is considered essential as it would make things relevant and generate interest in the learners. In this regard, McGrath emphasizes that materials should be familiar which means that the settings, interactions and characters should be familiar to the learners and at the same time it should not offend anyone on the basis of religious beliefs, social or political practices. Cultural appropriateness is thus the main stay of material production for second language learning.

Global and Local cultural material

The idea of "developing culturally indigenous materials" should not be narrowed down to local materials only but indigenising materials from other cultures and making such materials contextually relevant for the learners. Any learning system should ensure an inflow of knowledge and information from the outside world while looking at the indigenous knowledge systems seriously allowing the teachers for their creative interpretation and the learners for better understanding. As mentioned earlier, the obvious need for developing culturally indigenous material in curriculum innovation for teaching of English in schools in the state of Nagaland especially at the middle school level is for its unique social and cultural identity, on the one hand, and the transitional stage of the learners as they grow from childhood to adolescence, on the other. In this context, it is argued that curriculum which is prepared for learners of a totally different culture or globally oriented would be irrelevant and ineffective for learners in the state without taking cognizance of their own social and cultural aspects. The culture of learning, the educational system, the teaching and learning situation as well as the sensitive stage of the learners make their own demand on the curriculum, for the learners at this stage are too inquisitive to know, to feel, to see and to experience and question everything that come their way be it in school or at home. Given such a situation, it is argued that learners should be familiar with their own immediate surroundings and for that teaching materials in schools should be drawn from their immediate environments. It is hoped that through incorporation of local materials in the syllabus learners would be motivated to learn English in their own context. Not only that they would learn English with confidence and dignity because materials would be familiar and are from their own culture but also would prepare them for better understanding and appreciation

of other cultures thereby preparing them for better intercultural communication and understanding without fear of language shock or culture shock in their higher classes. For such a curriculum to be materialised we may consider the fact that the future of the people as well as of the state is inter-linked to its past, to its history, traditions, customs, folklores and languages. In this context, the state school education should promote the study of its history, languages, tradition, political and social systems; religion, customary laws, cultivation of crops and care of animals; rocks, soils and vegetation; philosophies and codes of behaviour; folklores, music, dances, festivals, etc. through teaching of English as a second language. The above mentioned themes could become resources for curriculum development although it might be difficult at the initial stages for it has to be first collected, written down, translated into English and, finally, productively used for the teaching of English. However, while developing curriculum for whichever context or level of learning it is meant, it is important to bear in mind the suggestion made by Mahatma Gandhi "Real education has to draw out the best from the boys and girls to be educated. This can never be done by packing ill-assorted and unwanted information into the heads of the pupils. It becomes a dead weight crushing all originality in them and turning them into mere automata" (*Harijan*, 1st December 1933 cited in *National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document*, NCERT 2000:1). What obtains from this is that material developers, designers, planners, stake-holders, concerned authorities need to ensure the cultural needs of the learners through language education. Altan (1995) has precisely pointed out that language teaching course books are not without cultural bias and the themes and topics which are foreign to the learners would cause misunderstanding and confusion hence culturally adverse materials need to be avoided. He argues that "There is no such thing as culturally-neutral language teaching. ELT coursebooks convey cultural biases and implicitly communicate attitudes concerning the culture of the target language and indirectly the learners' native culture. Passages and units with foreign cultural themes and topics not only cause difficulties in comprehension, but actually seem to increase misunderstanding and confusion about the non-native culture, leading to a lack of production and of success. When both the materials we use and the way we use them are culturally adverse, then inevitably learners switch off and retreat into their inner world to defend their own integrity" (1995:59 in McGrath 2002:213). His argument makes a strong case for local-cultural-material-based- syllabus for the benefit of both teachers as well as learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that developing culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English in schools especially at the middle school level in Nagaland is considered essential for the benefit of the learners and for the community.

The point is, culturally appropriate and socially sensitive materials would better facilitate the learning process of the learners at the same time, it would heighten the confidence of the teachers because the materials are familiar and they know how to use them. Materials drawn from the learners' own culture other than foreign culture would be more motivating and fascinating besides building up their confidence and dignity while learning a language which is rather new and foreign to them. Such an effort is thought to be a better option rather than globally driven materials or materials constructed from Western culture and thinking.

The reason behind this idea is that the culture of learning differs from culture to culture and society to society, and as a result materials which are not in keeping with the culture of the learners are not only irrelevant (because, for example, learners in Nagaland have limited contact with the Western people, and almost all the learners have seen the Western people and culture in movies, television, and in person in the form of some tourists and missionaries) but it would also weigh down the learning process for the learners. Even the quality of teaching would be affected. What is required therefore is that, to develop materials that are in keeping with the culture of the learners and learners' culture of learning, necessary steps should be taken by those who are responsible for curriculum development in second language education. Such an effort would yield positive results making the learners feel at ease or comfortable with the materials in learning English as a second language in Nagaland.

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