

Original Research Article

Status of English Language Proficiency (ELP) in English Medium versus Other Language Medium Schools in South-Eastern India

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ABSTRACT

Given the increase in service sector jobs, the demand for English education in school is increasing day by day. To keep up with this demand the government is also setting up English-medium schools. Apart from state boards, many boards like ICSE and CBSE are also imparting English education. This paper seeks to find out the English language proficiency (ELP) level of pupils of various boards, especially in the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal. Of the different school Boards, students of Indian Council of Secondary Education (ICSE) board had the greatest proficiency while the lowest proficiency appeared in schools run by respective State Boards.

KEYWORDS

English language proficiency of different boards, demand for English education, early introduction to English

Introduction

I am a primary school teacher in a government school in West Bengal. Recently, from the year 2019, the government has started English-medium schools from the Pre-Primary and class I levels. There has long been a tendency among parents to seek English-medium education for their wards even when it means spending their frugal means on mushrooming private English-medium schools. The government of Jharkhand had also started English-medium schools a few years ago and as of 30.01.2015, it had about 40 model English-medium schools.

This paper tries to analyse through field survey and data analysis whether this preference for English-medium schools is justified or not based on pupils' English Language Proficiency (ELP).

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC, 2005) had recommended that English should be taught as subject from Class I itself. Accordingly, English has been introduced as a subject in most of the states of India. Alongside, like West Bengal and Jharkhand, the governments of most states in India have also introduced English-medium schools.

The Study is based on a field survey conducted in schools of Jharkhand and West Bengal. Schools affiliated to every functioning Board within the two States were included. Tests were designed and administered to classes IV, VII, IX and XI in all these schools and the data run through SPSS software. English language teaching has been a matter of government policy in the two States; hence, the present Study also includes a history of such determinations by the government as has been made from time to time, and the impact of such determinations.

State of the Art

Jharkhand

Jharkhand is a relatively new state carved out of Bihar in 2000.

In British India, in Bihar, the desire to learn English could be found in fewer instances than in Bengal districts. English education in Bihar was in fact misconstrued as an attempt on the part of the Governor to convert the province to Christianity.

English was first introduced by private enterprise to meet the local demands of individuals or small communities, but they were also few.

The teaching of English started in government schools and colleges in Bihar after the establishment of the General Committee of Public Instructions (GCPI) in 1823. One school was set up each in the districts of Bhagalpur, Purnea and Patna. However, due to public apathy more of such schools could not be opened. Macaulay's Minute (1835). Missionary schools were also not doing well.

The Wood's Dispatch of 1855 also could not have much of an impact in Bihar, though it was a part of the Bengal Presidency. But people slowly started to realize the importance of English education and in the years following the Mutiny even secondary schools were set up, and when the government tried to close English schools in Chotanagpur region in 1870, people protested against it.

The railway lines opened the door to new opportunities in the region and English education started on a large scale. The demand for government jobs also increased people's demand for English education.

But for college education Biharis had to go to Calcutta. The situation changed in 1917, when Patna University was established.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1920 negatively affected English education in Bihar in a far deeper way than it did in Bengal.

During the first three decades after independence, as in the rest of India, there was an unprecedented growth in education in Bihar. However, most of the improvements were of a quantitative nature.

In Bihar in 1967, the state government, with Karpoori Thakur as the Education Minister, brought into vogue a scheme of pass without English at the Secondary and Higher Secondary examinations. The last English book for school written in Bihar before Jharkhand was carved out was in 1977. After its creation, in an effort to improve the English condition of the state, the Jharkhand government launched a massive overhaul of the system. It adopted the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) model. But even then, matters have not improved much. In class X, a pupil has to pass in two languages. Pupils have to take English and Hindi. As additional subject they can also take a language paper. In that case if a pupil fails in Hindi / English, the additional paper is replaced with it. Hence, passing in English is not compulsory under the state system, unlike ICSE.

Jharkhand has a massive tribal population. There are as many as 27 different tribes in the state with their different languages. Many of them do not understand even Hindi. When pupils come to school, teachers have to first acquaint them with Hindi words. Thus, English become for them a third, fourth, or fifth language.

However, the demand for English education is high. The pupils with whom I interacted said they wanted to learn English to get good jobs. Parents also want English education for their wards and for this reason, send their wards to private, English-medium schools. As Rana & Das (2004) note in their study of Dumka the number of private schools going children is significant given the poor economic condition of the area. The inclination to send children to private schools was found to be equally high among all the castes, and it was particularly evident among the relatively affluent scheduled tribe families.

The government is complying with this demand by setting up English-medium schools.

West Bengal

In Bengal, English education started with the missionaries from 1614. Soon the East India Company embarked to set up an education policy for India. This gave rise to the Anglo-Orientalist controversy. The Bengalis were in favour of English education, including Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

The Calcutta University established in 1857, made English the medium of instruction and examination at the University and at entrance level. This had its influence on secondary as well as primary education.

The various University Commissions recommended the use of the vernacular in the primary school but, such observations and recommendations did not much affect the practice of English being taught at the primary level in schools of Bengal as English was considered to be the Rajbhasa and a language of opportunity and power until Bombay University decided against using English as the medium in 1929, which was followed by the University of Calcutta in 1940.

After the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, English education suffered a setback. However, as the initial anger subsided, by 1927, people were once again rushing to English-medium schools.

But the opinions of influential people were now tilting in favour of the use of vernacular as the medium, such as those of Haraprasad Shastri, Gooroo Das Banerjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Lokendranath Palit. The Hartog Committee of 1929 and Wood-Abbot Committee of 1937 also advocated the vernacular as the medium of instruction in school education.

English was, however, considered important a major subject in school education by all quarters.

So we can see that English has been prevailing in school education in Bengal for a long time, but it was confined to the gentry of the urban and rural areas. It did not filtrate to the masses as Macaulay had envisaged.

Since Independence, English continued to be taught from class I in West Bengal. All primary school students in West Bengal at that time had to learn two languages from grade I — Bengali and English.

The government of West Bengal instituted a commission for 'Reorganisation of School Education' in 1949. The most urgent question before the committee was that of adopting a system of universal and free primary education. The committee was headed by the then education minister Harendranath Roy Chowdhury. It decided that English should not be taught in the primary classes i.e. till class IV. Accordingly, an attempt was made to abolish English but because of the pressure from parents, the English teaching was allowed to commence from class III. In reality, most taught English from class I and made English knowledge a criterion for admitting students even in class I.

A major change occurred in 1983, when based on the recommendations of the Himangshu Bimal Mazumdar committee the West Bengal government advocated the teaching of English from class VI. This decision was supported by UNESCO recommendations as well as the Radhakrishnan Commission, the Mudaliar Commission and the Kothari Commission for imparting primary education through the mother tongue. The committee also advocated the teaching of English through the functional-communicative method instead of the traditional grammar-translation method. Both these recommendations drew a lot of criticism from various quarters.

In 1992, the State Education Commission under the chairmanship of Ashok Mitra recommended the teaching of English in government and government-aided institutions from class V based on the eagerness of parents. Private institutions were left out of the purview of the Commission. The recommendation came to effect from 1994 onwards.

However, public dissatisfaction continued as parents wanted children to learn English in primary school.

The government complied with this demand in 1998 by setting up a special One-Man Committee, chaired by Professor Pabitra Sarkar. The resultant report recommended that English language learning would be formally reintroduced into state (government) primary schools, and it would be taught from class III onwards from the year 2000. Some informal introduction to English may be done from class II.

In 2012, the newly-formed government of West Bengal set up a Committee of Experts to examine the entire syllabi, curricula and texts from Class-I to Class-XII in the state and to suggest modifications thereof in line with the provisions of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) and National Curriculum Frame Work - 2005 & 2009. The new syllabus and textbooks became effective for some classes from academic year 2013 and for others from 2014.

In comparison to the previous syllabus where the method recommended for teaching English was the direct method, in the new syllabus the method recommended is bilingualism used with restraint.

Objectives

To know the state of English language proficiency in English medium versus other language medium schools in Jharkhand and West Bengal.

Subject of the Test

Competency in the four skills of English Language Teaching:

1. Listening
2. Speaking
3. Reading
4. Writing

Variable

The Medium of School, i.e. regional language medium (in this case Hindi or Bengali) or English medium. To ensure a representative sample of the students of the various school boards, for the urban region, I have conducted the tests in four schools of the state boards in each state (Jharkhand School Board and West Board of Secondary Education), divided equally between boys and girls. Of these four schools, two were regional language-medium schools and two were English-medium schools. The regional board schools are all single-sex schools in West Bengal. For the CBSE board schools, I have conducted the test in one school of each state since CBSE and ICSE schools are very few in number as compared to the state boards in each state. As the schools were co-educational in both states, I chose five girls and five boys from each school. For the ICSE board, I have conducted the test in one girls' school and one boys' school with five students from each school in each state. The ICSE board schools are all English-medium schools.

For the rural region, the predominant board was the state board in each state. Apart from the cities, CBSE and ICSE schools are available only in the townships and not the rural areas proper in either state. Hence, in the rural areas, all the samples gathered were from the state board schools. Further, all state board schools in the rural regions are regional-language-medium schools.

Research Methodology and Tools Used

The major part of this research work was based on data collected from schools of both the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal.

Questionnaires were given to students for assessing their English language proficiency and their attitude towards English both inside and outside the classroom.

Questionnaires were given to teachers for getting their feedback on the various problems they face in teaching English.

Sample design for students' English language proficiency test

The sample consists of 640 school students studying in classes IV, VII, IX and XI in English medium and regional medium schools in Jharkhand and West Bengal. A stratified sample of 2x4x2x2x2 factorial design was used. The factors of stratification were:

- Two factors of state-Jharkhand and West Bengal
- Four factors of class — 4, 7, 9 and 11
- Two factors of place of residence — Urban and Rural
- Two factors of gender — Boy and Girl
- Two factors of medium of instruction — English and Regional Language

Altogether there are 64 strata. For each stratum, 10 cases were selected randomly, making a total of 640 students. The sample design is presented in following table. The sample in each stratum was assessed in terms of parental education, occupation and income.

State	Place of Birth	Medium of Instruction	Class								Total
			4		7		9		11		
			Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Jharkhand	Urban	Eng Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
		Reg Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
	Rural	Eng Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
		Reg Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
West Bengal	Urban	Eng Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
		Reg Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
	Rural	Eng Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
		Reg Med	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	80
Grand Total			80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	640

Tools for Collecting Data

For collecting data from the students, the following tools were used:

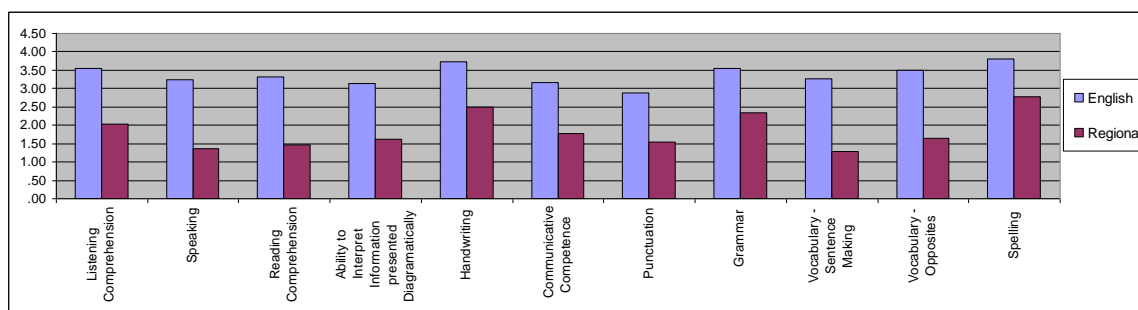
- Personal data questionnaire for students — for gathering information about their attitude to English, socio-economic background
- Questionnaire for assessing students' proficiency in the four skills of the English language
- Interval scale — for grading students' proficiency level in the four English language skills the data collected was marked on a 5-point scale:

- 1 — No competency
- 2 — Sufficient
- 3 — Good
- 4 — Very Good
- 5 — Excellent

- Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) — for evaluating the data collected
- Questionnaire for obtaining feedback from teachers in students' English language proficiency

Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

Class 4



Observation — English-medium students are more proficient in English than regional-language-medium students. Of all the variables this variable registered the greatest difference.

English medium students were "good", achieving more than 3.00 in all questions except punctuation (in which they scored 2.00). In none of the questions they scored 4.00. Regional-language-medium students achieved 2.00 in four

instances (listening, handwriting, grammar and spelling); in rest of the questions they scored 1.00 or were "insufficient".

Strong points for both - Listening, handwriting, grammar and spelling. Regional-language-medium students achieved 2.00 only in these questions.

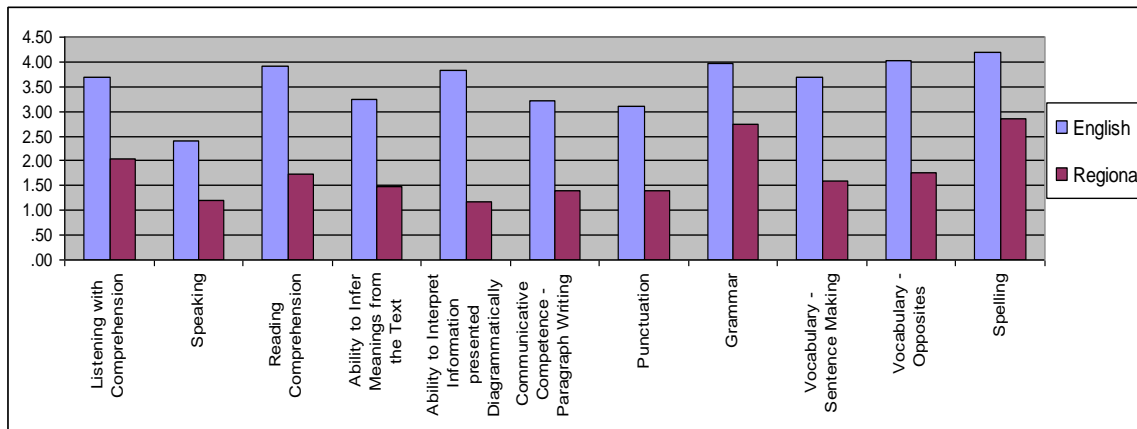
Weak points for both - Punctuation, communicative competence, speaking, and ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically.

Contrast — For all questions there was significant difference between English- and regional- language-medium schools. But vocabulary was a clear case in which English-medium students surged ahead while regional medium students dipped.

Reason — In English-medium schools unlike in regional-language medium schools English is taught not only as a subject in the curriculum but is the medium of instruction for all subjects and the medium of interaction in the school.

English-medium schools are more often located in urban areas.

Class 7



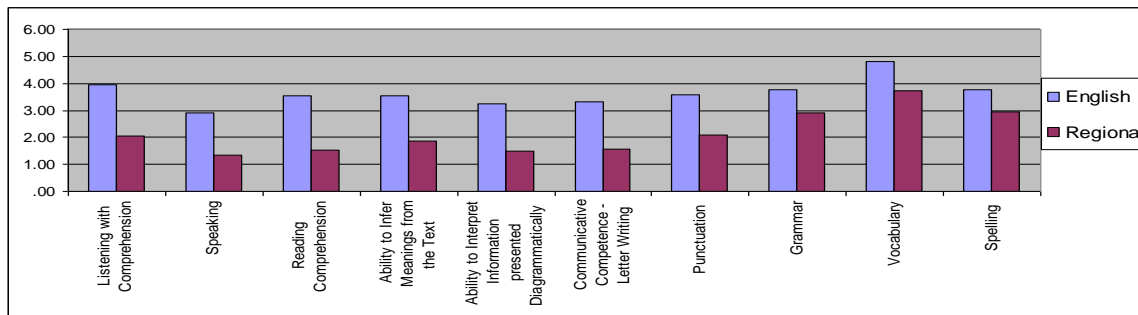
Observation — Students from English medium schools have performed better than regional-language medium schools in all questions. English-medium students reached 4.00 in two questions (grammar and spelling), crossed 3.00 in 6 questions and declined to 2.00 in one question (speaking), showing they are "good" generally in their proficiency level of English. Regional-medium students crossed 2.00 only in three instances (listening, grammar and spelling); in rest of the questions, i.e. 7, they scored 1.00 or were "insufficient".

Strong points for both — Listening, grammar and spelling. English-medium students got 3.00 in listening and 4.00 in both grammar and spelling. Regional-language medium students achieved 2.00 only in these questions.

Weak points for both — Speaking, ability to infer meanings from the text, paragraph writing, and punctuation. Regional-language medium students were "insufficient" in these questions. English-medium students got 3.00 in all these questions except speaking in which they got 2.00. But these were comparatively weak points from them as seen in the graph.

Contrast — reading, and ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically.

Class 9



Observation: English-medium students surpassed regional-language students in all respects.

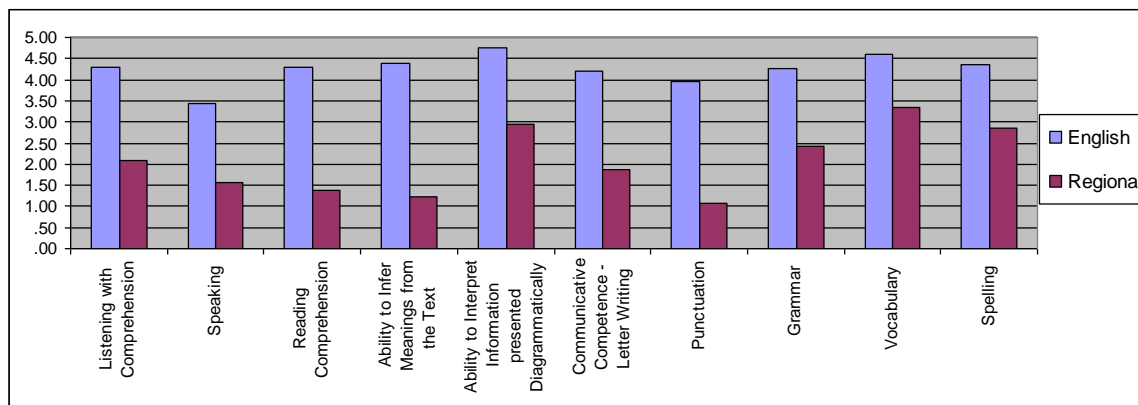
English medium students reached 4.00 in 2 questions (listening and vocabulary), achieved more than 3.00 in 7 questions and decreased to 2.00 in 1 question (speaking). Regional language medium students achieved 3.00 in one question (vocabulary), 2.00 in four questions (listening, punctuation, grammar and spelling), but in majority of the questions, i.e. 5, they were "insufficient".

Strong points — grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

Contrast — Listening presented a point of contrast vis-à-vis the two mediums.

Weak points — Apart from the skills mentioned in "strong points" and "contrast" all others were weak points for both mediums. Speaking was the worst case.

Class 11



Observation — Students from English-medium schools performed better than those from regional-medium schools.

English-medium students achieved 4.00 in all questions, except speaking (3.00). Regional-medium students crossed 3.00 in one question (vocabulary) and 2.00 in four questions (listening, ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically, grammar and spelling). However, in majority of the questions, i.e. 5, they were "insufficient".

Strong — ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically, grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

Weak — speaking

Contrast — Listening, reading, ability to infer meanings from the text, punctuation and communicative competence were areas of contrast for class 11.

Results

Combined Observation for All Classes

In the regional language medium schools in all classes the instruction for each question had to be explained in Hindi in Jharkhand and Bengali in West Bengal.

It can be observed that the general level of English proficiency of English-medium students is more than "good", barring one exception each from classes 4 (punctuation), 7 (speaking) and 9 (speaking) in which they attained 2.00. In class 11, urban students were "very good" in all questions except speaking (3.00), showing a progressive movement. However, the proficiency level of regional medium students for the majority of skills is "insufficient"; they scored 1.00 in 6, 7, 5 and 5 questions in classes 4, 7, 9 and 11, respectively. Nonetheless, they do show an improvement with increase in the years of schooling, achieving 3.00 in one question each in classes 9 and 11.

For all questions there was marked variation between the two mediums. Nonetheless, some common areas of strength and weakness can be identified based on each groups' relative performance in the various questions.

Strong

- Grammar and spelling were areas of strength for all the classes. In class 4, regional-language-medium students achieved 2.00 and English medium students achieved 3.00 in these questions. In class 7, English medium students got 4.00 in both grammar and spelling, while regional language medium students achieved 2.00.
- Listening was strong for two classes— 4 and 7. In both these classes, regional-language-medium students scored 2.00 and English-medium students scored 3.00 for listening.
- Vocabulary was strong for two classes — 9 and 11.
- Handwriting was an area of strength for class 4. The term "strong" is applied relatively, since in classes 4 and 7, rural students achieved 2.00 in these questions only. In rest of the questions they scored just 1.00. Hence these have been classified as their areas of relative strength. In class 4, urban students also did not achieve more than 3.00 in any question.
- Ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically was an area of strength for class 11.

Weak

- Speaking was weak for all classes.
- Punctuation and communicative competence in writing (which was labelling pictures for class 4, paragraph writing for class 7, and letter writing for class 9) were weak for classes 4, 7 and 9.
- Ability to interpret information presented diagrammatically was weak for classes 4 and 9.
- Ability to infer meanings from the text was weak for classes 7 and 9.
- Reading was a weak point for only class 9.

Contrast

- Reading was an area of contrast for two classes — 7 and 11.
- Listening was also a point of contrast for two classes — 9 and 11.
- Vocabulary and ability to interpret information diagrammatically were areas of contrast for classes 4 and 7, respectively.
- Ability to infer meanings from the text, punctuation and communicative competence were areas of contrast for class 11. It is interesting to note that the number of questions for which scoring presents a great deal of contrast between rural and urban areas is quite high for the senior most class 11.

Reasons for the better performance of English-medium students

- English-medium schools are more numerous in urban areas than in rural areas.
- English-medium schools are generally private and they charge fees. Hence they cater to the more affluent sections of the society, be it in the rural or urban areas.

- Parents who send their wards to such schools are also better educated themselves and can provide English learning atmosphere in their homes. Such students often converse with their parents, siblings and friends in English, watch English movies, and read English books.
- Rural better-off students and regional-language-medium students on the other hand reported that they enjoyed "English movies dubbed in Hindi" not in the English language itself.
- The government schools of Jharkhand come under the Jharkhand Board. These schools have been set up throughout the state with the aim of educating the most underprivileged sections of society. There are innumerable villages where electricity has yet to reach. In such conditions, schools have introduced English as a subject from class 1 but the medium of instruction is Hindi and the teachers of these schools are not adequately educated and trained.
- In addition, most of the population in Jharkhand is tribal with a tribal dialect as their mother tongue. Their dialects vary to a great extent. Santhali is different from that of Ho. The same is the case with Kudukh and Kharia and so on. Students as well as people in general are not able to communicate well even in Hindi. Teachers report they have to teach even Hindi through the vernacular. In such a situation teaching English is difficult even as a foreign language.
- The vast majority of teachers themselves have a very limited command of English.
- Some of the primary school teachers in Jharkhand answered the Teachers' Questionnaire in Hindi. Some of them had English as an additional subject.
- In West Bengal also, English is taught basically as a school subject. For rural children it is a foreign language. Students are now being exposed to English from class 1 but still it remains a class subject and it is taught through the mother tongue. The method used for teaching is the function-communicative method. Books have also been written as per this method. But the interactive nature of teaching through this method remains elusive for teachers who have not received adequate training.

Suggestions for Improvement

Teachers

- In both West Bengal and Jharkhand there are some schools where there are surplus teachers and some schools where more teachers are required. This situation must be addressed efficiently.
- Moreover, in Jharkhand many primary schools have been upgraded to upper primary schools, thereby increasing the number of students, but there are no separate language teachers to teach in the upper grades. Other subject teachers try to squeeze as much time as possible to teach English as possible, resulting in only about two periods to English in a week.
- Regarding teacher training, over the past few years, several states, including Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand and West Bengal, have prepared strategies for enabling the existing untrained teachers to acquire the Diploma in Elementary Education qualification through the distance-cum-contact mode.
- Teachers should be trained in spoken English. Many teachers I interviewed expressed this belief.
- Capacity skills of teachers i.e. their ability to take on multiple roles such as those of administration and others, should also be increased.

NCERT Textbooks, especially in the context of Jharkhand

The introduction of NCERT books from class I is problematic as teachers find it difficult to cope with the textbooks and help children who don't even have a basic knowledge of English. Private school pupils pass through many classes like nursery, kindergarten and preparatory before reaching class I. Teachers also need an orientation to the NCERT textbooks and some readiness material for the children before using them. Teachers feel it is not up to the level of pupils. Teachers hesitate to implement some easy learning materials they can make because they are pressed to finish the syllabus.

Handwriting

Cursive writing is not taught or given for practice in most schools, even some renowned English medium schools. Even if it is done it is done in a cursory manner.

Better English learning atmosphere in the classroom:

- Every effort should be made to remove anxiety and English phobia from students. Pupils should be told that by learning English they are bilinguals. This increases their confidence.
- The number and duration of English classes should be increased as most of the students studying in government schools are first generation learners and rely entirely on the school to learn English. Some pupils even laugh if they hear a teacher speaking in English, since they have never heard it.
- Each subject teacher can familiarize pupils to terminologies in English. The same stories can be told in English and the mother tongue and English to familiarize pupil to English, particularly in primary classes.
- Teaching-learning materials should be provided. In Jharkhand the percentage of schools with computers is much higher as compared to the rest of the country. This can be used to teach English. The radio programme for teaching English that was conducted from 2005-7 should be re-instated. But both language teachers as well as other teachers need to be taught how to use it. Other teachers need to be trained in case the English language teacher is absent. The radio programme was well liked by teachers as well as students.
- Sufficient language teachers must be recruited, otherwise it is difficult to conduct smart classes or impart quality teaching of English.
- Students should be encouraged to converse among themselves in school in English.
- Involve student participation in class in group discussions.
- Mother tongue can be used judiciously in the primary level.
- In higher classes the use of the mother tongue should be reduced as the English vocabulary of student increase.
- The spiral method whereby pupils are revised about previous lessons before starting on new ones are helpful.

For encouraging communication and participation from pupils

- Teachers should talk to students more in English
- Teachers should talk slowly
- Teachers should talk with physical gestures
- Teachers' should ask children to perform tasks giving the instruction in English
- Teachers should welcome verbal efforts of children
- Teachers should encourage children to communicate
- Teachers should emphasize fluency

What the teacher should not do in the classroom

- Teacher should not take students as passive listeners
- Teachers should not discourage students when they are wrong
- Teachers should not focus on correctness from the very beginning
- Since English is learnt only for a few hours in school it is usually told, "Out of sight, out of mind." Instead of developing a negative attitude, a positive attitude can be created, if we say, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

For improving English at home

- Students should be encouraged to read more English
- To enrich vocabulary, comprehension exercises from unseen passages should be practiced
- Students should be encouraged to use the dictionary
- Writing diary daily should be encouraged
- The students should be encouraged to do their own studies. In this regard it should be noted that the dependence of students on private tuition in Jharkhand is lower in Jharkhand than in West Bengal.
- If required small tutorial classes should be conducted after school hours in the school itself. This would do much to mitigate the private tuition started by quacks. This has already started in Jharkhand as well as West Bengal. To improve matters, Jharkhand Academic Council has also started mock tests for pupils.
- Most importantly both teacher and parents should try to create an atmosphere of education.

Facilities for the tribal and non-tribal poor

- Book bank should be created
- In rural tribal area boarding facilities should be arranged for students at least during months when their parents migrate in search of work.
- Easy interesting learning materials can be provided to pupils at home so that get a print rich environment at home as well.
- Phonodril method: Just drill of nursery rhymes is not sufficient for teaching pronunciation to all pupils. Different rhymes with varying focus on consonants should be prescribed for different cultural groups.

Medium Issue

Given the eagerness among parents for English education for their children many English-medium schools have also come up in rural areas. Although the quality of teaching in these private schools is not assured (and, in some cases, worse than that imparted in government schools), the illusory positive perception about these schools has taken firm root among the people.

English should be continued to be taught from class I as it is being done at present. Particularly for Jharkhand, some months of orientation to English must be given so that they are not intimidated by the class I textbook of NCERT. Instead of hankering after English medium private schools the combined efforts of the government, teachers and parents will help to improve the performance of the pupils in English.

Conclusion

From the above survey and analysis, it is abundantly clear that English-medium students do have a clear advantage as compared to regional-language-medium students. It is no wonder then that parents harp for English-medium schools. The decision of state governments to start English-medium schools is a step in the right direction since students will get more exposure and practice in English in English-medium schools. Teacher training, to cope up with the new system and books, must also be put in place.

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