

The Impact of Content: English Textbook Designing in India

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Introduction

Human consciousness plays a huge role in the formation of one's identity. In this regard, Vygotsky (1925) states that social activities explain the emergence of consciousness in human beings. So social can also be an artifact and thus, may also be 'a regulatory agency that channels human behavior and thought' (Ramanathan, 2005, p. 25). Considering that schools can communicate the legitimate forms of truth through prescribed textbooks, and that the English language controls and moulds power relations in contemporary Indian society, critically looking into how texts are chosen and tasks are designed in English textbooks in India may explain their possible impact on the formation of student identity.

English textbook designing in India

Dat (2008), in a review of English textbooks used in South-East Asia, points out that English textbook designers in the region "seriously lack professional course developers and that there has not been adequate training in materials development" (p. 276). The scenario is not very different in India, even though there have been some positive developments in the field in the last few years. However, having only a handful of trained experts in the area does not really help the cause. To make matters worse, quite a few so-called 'trained experts' prefer writing textbooks for reputed publishing houses because of the huge financial benefits. This leaves the state as well as the central educational boards

(such as NCERT) with fewer options. Given that a large percentage of textbook writers at a state level is unaware of what Littlejohn (1992) calls 'What is there', 'What is required' and 'What is implied', i.e. the basic theories and practices of textbook designing, quite a few of them choose easily available texts, follow the design of a few already existing textbooks, and develop some traditionally used task and activity

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types. With pre-service training for English teachers offering little help with materials designing, teaching and learning become dawdling and uninteresting.

Textbook content and politics of class and caste

Morarji (2004), in an analysis of the Environmental Studies textbooks prescribed by the NCERT, comments: "Lessons in textbooks are coded in ways which marginalize rural identity markers, and actively prescribe identities that are coded as urban middle-class". Morarji's

observations are very similar to that of Illaiah (1996), who claims that the course content is either unrelated to the cultural experiences of *dalit* students, or undervalues their educational experience, dignity and self-esteem. Such irregularities can also be found in English textbooks. However, it is surprising that the content and context in English textbooks have not drawn much attention for research, even though the fact remains that “English language proficiency in a globalizing India is an essential component of one’s cultural baggage....For the middle classes, English is a resource that must be defended and maintained at all costs” (Scrase, 2004, p.16).

There are several ways in which the selection of content for English textbooks can have a direct impact on the formation of identity of the learners. In India, students from backward classes and minority communities often find themselves at a disadvantage. Their community, belief systems, socio-cultural practices, etc., are either presented in a distorted manner, or excluded from the textbook altogether. Also, students coming from the dominant classes/communities to the classroom start forming a derogatory picture of these unrepresented or badly represented classes/communities and of the people belonging to these communities. Basically, those who have access to social comforts, luxuries, advanced technology, books, magazines, etc., can easily and happily identify themselves with the characters presented in the texts. On the other hand, students from backward classes who have very little or no access to the facilities mentioned above, may not have many characters and contexts to identify with. For example, a chapter on Computers is prescribed for Class IX students in Odisha, where more than 60% of students are from backward classes.

As if the bias and ignorance in the content selection is not enough, the end-of-lesson tasks further complicate matters. The questions used

in these tasks often develop a sense of ‘right and wrong’, and ‘good and bad’ in students. In other words, they stealthily infuse “forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (Apple, 1990, p. 3). For example, a text talks about a female student from a slum who is given guava leaves boiled in water by her mother when she has fever. The questions at the end of lesson are asked in a way that makes the students believe that tablets and medicines prescribed by the doctors and available in the medical stores are ‘the only right kind’ of medicines. Again, if the text mentions that the girl’s mother does not take care of her, and beats her if she asks for clothes and other things, the end-of-lesson questions may portray

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the mother as a villain, instead of looking at the pathetic condition she is in, and the struggles she has to undergo every day to earn a living. Moreover, the questions can sometimes create a picture of what a ‘good and ideal’ woman is expected to do.

If the inclusion of Western or foreign texts at an early stage of English education brings cultural alienation (e.g. NCERT Class V textbook *Marigold*), texts where the social practices of students are presented in a negative light does more damage to their self-esteem and motivation. They become apprehensive about their socio-cultural identity, and try to either acquire a pseudo-identity of higher classes, or end up feeling a sense of depression, shame, anger and rebelliousness. Similarly, one’s sense

of right, wrong, good, bad, clean, hygienic, and social acceptance, etc., is also shaped by English textbooks, because of the power, prestige and glamour attached with its learning. Ultimately, what the students start believing in is exactly what the politically dominant class wants them to believe. Such beliefs get fossilized; then the individual gradually loses the power of questioning; and finally, he/she gets assimilated into the belief system of the dominant class.

Government and private school English textbooks

The government-private divide is perhaps the most obvious factor when it comes to class politics in ELT in India; NCERT, CBSE, ICSE and the state educational boards, all produce their own English textbooks. As I have discussed earlier, textbook designing at the central level involves more expertise than in the states. However, there has been a long and inconclusive debate about the validity of a national curriculum. It is virtually impossible to cater to the needs of a large variety of students from different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds through one textbook at one level. Moreover, the inclusion of a high percentage of foreign English texts in the English textbooks, such as in the ICSE (Classes IX and X) and NCERT (*'Marigold'* for Class V), is ridiculous and unreasonable.

The state-level textbook designing in India has improved over the last decade. But issues based on caste, class, gender, sexuality, politics, religion, etc., have remained forbidden territories for textbook writers, and 'critical thinking' has been confined to garnishing policy materials. So there is little scope for preparing students to challenge the unequal and undemocratic practices prevalent in Indian societies.

Like the elitist set-up of private English medium schools, the English textbooks used in such schools are often designed by well known

materials designers and produced by renowned publishing houses. The absence of a rule emphasizing the use of only government-produced textbooks encourages these practices. It is not only the layout and price of the books, but also the texts and tasks presented in them that ensure the exclusion of students from underprivileged backgrounds. Textbooks are mere tools in this practice of hegemony in which English as a cultural capital helps maintain the dominance of the middle and upper class over the underprivileged class. In this set-up, all the good intentions of the 'education for all' policy remain unattended.

Decolonizing and democratizing English textbooks

The politics of English textbooks is a part of what Ramanathan (2005) calls 'assumptions nexus'. She defines it in the following terms:

"...everything in class-related conventions that inform how and why particular class groups live and make the choices they do in almost every realm of everyday existence, including those related to schooling, child-rearing, literacy practices at home, clothing and public appearances, food, how money gets spent, body sizes, weight, health, nutrition and hairdos and, most importantly, in the present case, opting for fluency in English (sometimes through an EM education)" (p. 37).

So changing the writing practice of textbooks is a huge challenge because all the stakeholders in the decision-making position are part of the societal structure it is based on. However, there is a possibility of changing the socially generated and constructed consciousness through a critical curricular pattern based on democratic ideologies. Introducing critical thinking components in training programmes for textbook writers and teachers may make a good start. However, it will be better to have such components in pre-service programmes, to

ensure that they get a solid foundation in critical thinking. The next step could be making the presence of experts working in government universities mandatory during textbook designing programmes at the state level. There should be restrictions on people who work for private publishing houses while drawing fat salaries from government treasuries. Also, it could be of great help to have a national certification body to monitor the writing of English textbooks in the country. There should be clear guidelines against which all the content and tasks of textbooks should be examined and passed before getting published. Efforts should be made to pitch texts and tasks on a democratically representative ground so that they promote communal harmony, mutual respect, nationhood, and above all, critical thinking. This may lead to the realization of an NCF (2005) dream- "...nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country" (p. viii).

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