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Research Paper

Elementary EFL Education of the Chakma Students in Bangladesh: Present Scenario and Required Measures

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Abstract

The current study particularly investigated if the teachers gave thought to the linguistic and cultural background of the Chakma students while teaching English and preparing materials for giving them English lessons. The researchers interviewed 10 EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers from 10 primary schools located in Chakma majority areas, observed 10 EFL classrooms of the same schools and analyzed the English textbooks of National Curriculum and Textbook Board for class one to five to elicit data. The data were analyzed by content analysis and cross-case analysis. The study identified that mostly Bengali speaking teachers having inadequate knowledge of Chakma language and culture were teaching English to the Chakma children. Besides, the lessons of the English textbooks did not include activities that might interest the children of that particular ethnic group. Hence, it is imperative that the government consider ethnicity while recruiting EFL teachers for the Chakma majority areas, and the EFL textbooks should be developed separately for the Chakma speaking children.

Keywords

Chakma students, cultural and linguistic background, EFL textbooks, ethnicity

1. Introduction

In the recent decades, the advancement of ethnic groups or tribal people has become one of the most emerging policy issues in all developed and developing countries. Ethnic communities can be a blessing for a country as Bangladesh is blessed with about 58 ethnic groups who live in different parts of the country. In number, they are 1.2 million which is just above one percent of the total population of the country. These tribes are unique and different from each other according to their cultures and traditions. They have their own languages, rites and rituals, religious and

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social norms, and so forth which have enriched Bangladesh as a well cultured country of South-East India. Among all the ethnic groups in Bangladesh, the Chakma people are the largest group who are the residents of the Chattogram Hill Tracts region in Southern Bangladesh. This tribe also has its own language, culture and tradition and different religious and social norms.

However, the Chakma people are the largest ethnic group in the Chattogram Hill Tracts region in Southern Bangladesh. This tribal group has its own language, culture, rites and rituals and so forth. Research shows that the aspects of the culture and language of the teachers and learners in an EFL setting affect language education. Therefore, a language is acquired best when instruction is initiated in early childhood considering the cultural and linguistic background of the learners.

2. Objective

The objective of the study is to find out the present state of EFL education at the elementary level among the Chakma students in Bangladesh and to depict the measures needed to develop the existing panorama.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Culture and Language Learning

Language is a way of expressing our feelings, emotions, thoughts, needs, desires, etc. Besides, culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Thus, culture finds its expression in language. So, teaching and learning a new language without considering the cultural background of the learners remain incomplete. There are four views regarding the issue. The first one states that 'target language culture' should be taught along with English to acculturate language learners into the cultures of English-speaking countries (Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998). The second view states that there should not be any teaching of the 'target language culture' together with English in the countries where English is an institutionalized variety (Kachru, 1985, 1986; Kachru & Nelson, 1996). Other two views also reject the idea of teaching 'target language culture' along with English. However, while one of the views supports the teaching of 'local culture' in English language teaching (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), the other view holds the position that English has become a lingua franca and it should be taught in a culture-free context (Alptekin, 2005; Jenkins, 1996, 2000, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001).

3.2. L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom

Although exclusive or maximal use of the target language (TL) has been promoted in foreign language (FL) education (Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1978), classroom-based research has disclosed that teachers alternate between using the mother tongue (L1) and TL in FL classrooms (Chang, 2009; Ferguson, 2003; Macaro, 2001; Tien, 2004; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Due to the fact that teacher code switching is evident in FL contexts, many researchers (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Harbord, 1992) have re-examined the TL-only position. In general terms, these researchers warn against the excessive use of L1, but they do advocate using it judiciously in occasions such as eliciting language, assessing comprehension, giving instructions, and explaining grammar. The principled use of L1 in conjunction with TL has been proposed for a variety of pedagogical reasons: to provide scaffolding for tasks (Anton & Dicamilla, 1998), to promote the transition from L1 to TL use (Shamash, 1990), to improve negotiations (Swain & Lapkin, 2000), and to enhance TL comprehension (Turnbull, 2001).

Several studies have demonstrated the benefits of using L1 to learn a TL. For example, Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) analyzed the discourse of Spanish-speaking university students while they engaged in peer revision of their TL (English) writing. Their data demonstrates that "the L1 was an essential tool for making meaning of text, retrieving language from memory, exploring and

expanding content, guiding their action through the task, and maintaining dialogue" (p. 60). Similarly, Swain and Lapkin (2000), in their examination of the L1 uses by 22 pairs of Grade 8 French immersion students as they completed dictogloss and jigsaw tasks, found that if the students had not used L1 as a means of negotiation and communication, the tasks may not have been accomplished as effectively, or perhaps they might not have been accomplished at all. Furthermore, Hsieh (2000) discovered that translation, one way of using L1, improved her college students' ability to read English in terms of reading comprehension, reading strategies, vocabulary learning, and cultural background knowledge.

3.3. Adaptation of EFL Materials

Historically, two attitudes have been adopted towards how to plan and develop materials for especially foreign language classes. Some educators have favored the use of authentic materials which are thought to contain more natural and realistic examples of language use. Some others have approved of the culturally-specific content in which all norms, values and standards as well as beliefs of learners should be taught in relation to the content. Those advocating the former view say that classroom materials should as far as possible mirror the real world and use real-world or authentic sources as the basis for classroom learning, which can generate communicative processes, develop learners' cultural awareness of L2 and engage learners in real-life or authentic communication. From the perspectives of the latter group, materials should be culturally- or locally-relevant because learners will be able to relate them to their own everyday-life situations and experiences so that they are meaningful to them.

From the discussion, it is clear that local language should not be neglected while designing English language materials and teaching English in EFL context. Moreover, the use of L1 might promote language learning, especially in the case of the elementary level students. The present study tried to explore whether the teacher teaching English language to the Chakma students at the elementary level considered the cultural background of the learners and the effects of their way of teaching on their language achievement. The researcher also observed the relation of the medium of instruction and the EFL materials they were using while teaching English to their language achievement level.

4. Methodology

Qualitative method was used to conduct the research. Both in-depth-interview and classroom observation were used to accomplish the study. Besides the researcher analyzed the English textbooks for classes 1 to 5 to collect data. To conduct the study, the researchers surveyed on 10 primary schools located in Chakma majority areas. 10 EFL teachers from those schools were selected for an in-depth-interview session. The teachers were selected considering their job experience and educational background. There were six male teachers and four female teachers all of whom were teaching English language at grade one to five in those schools. All the selected teachers had at least three years of job experience at the schools in tribal majority areas and all of them were post graduated in English.

An in-depth-interview was conducted by the researchers in an informal setting where the teachers were asked 5 key open-ended questions. Each question was followed by some follow up questions so that the researchers could acquire a better knowledge of the issue. The researchers also prepared an EFL classroom observation checklist for observing the classroom activities and performance of the Chakma students. The researchers' main concern was to investigate whether the EFL teachers gave importance to the Chakma language and cultural background in teaching English to the Chakma students.

To collect data, the researchers went to the selected schools and with the school authorities' permission they entered into the EFL classrooms. Sitting behind of the classrooms, the researchers

observed the Chakma students' activities and their performances. According to the prepared checklist, the researchers kept observing the students intensively and taking notes. After classroom observation, the researchers sat in an informal sitting with the selected teachers from each school and took their interview. With the permission of the teachers, the researchers asked them some interview questions and recorded their answers with a mobile voice recorder. The researcher also used a self-constructed checklist to analyze the textbooks for class one to five. After completing both the classroom observation and the interview session, the researchers analyzed the collected data using content analysis and cross-case analysis to find out the final findings of the survey. In collecting data, all the teachers and the school authorities helped the researchers cordially.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed in the following sections based on the observation of the classroom, the interview of the teachers and the analysis of the English textbooks for the classes one to five. To do the cross check of the observation and the interview result, the interview results are discussed in the first section, and later then in the second section, the observation result according to the checklist is discussed.

5.1. Findings from the Teacher Interview

The researchers asked five key questions to the participants of the study. The questions were related to the personal issues and experience of the teachers who were teaching in elementary schools in Chakma majority areas, their thoughts about the importance of cultural and linguistic background of the language learners in teaching English and the English textbooks at the elementary levels.

The analysis shows that most of the teachers are Bengali speaking and they have inadequate knowledge about Chakma culture and language. They use traditional teaching method which is totally teacher-centered. The teachers even do not understand the importance of considering the Chakma students separately. None of the teachers are from English background and do not have any training on English teaching. Even the teachers who are from Chakma ethnic group how to teach Chakma children considering their background.

Most of the teachers have said they do not know anything about Chakma culture and language. While teaching English they use bangle as a medium of instruction. One of the teachers said,

I use Bangla as a medium of instruction while teaching English. I do not think, it is important to know about their culture as a teacher of English. Most of the students are from very poor family and they are reluctant to their study. Poverty and family background seem to be the most important causes of their poor achievement in English language. I do not conduct any pair work or group work to make them practice English language.

While responding the question related to the textbooks, most of the teachers have said that the textbooks for the students of classes one to five do not include activities that represent Chakma people and their culture. One of the teachers said that it could be motivating for the Chakma children, if the English textbooks contained some activities representing Chakma culture and religion.

5.2. Findings from the Classroom Observations

The researchers had observed 10 classrooms before he interviewed the teachers. The researchers found the classrooms very lively and the presence of the students was satisfactory. The teachers were mostly Bengali speaking though the Chakma students outnumbered Bengali speaking students. English classes were conducted in very conventional classroom settings. The teachers continued reading out from English textbooks and translated in Bengali so that the student could understand. Sometimes, the teachers involved the students to do some exercises from the

textbooks and checked their homework. No pair work or group work was seen to be conducted by the teachers. The teachers' English pronunciation seemed to be very poor. They did not use any technological tools or supplementary materials to teach English language. The students' level of English skill seemed below standard.

5.3. Findings from the Textbook Analyses

National Curriculum and Textbook Board, Bangladesh develops and distributes English language textbooks for the students of classes one to five. The textbook of a particular level contains the same contents. The researchers have anlysed the English language textbooks for the classes one to five and found that the books do not fulfill the needs and interest of any particular tribal group. The books do not contain anything that may have any relation to the chakma people or their culture. There are few pictures in some books representing tribal tradition, but those are very limited in number. So, the textbook does not create any opportunity for the chakma students to express the thoughts and ideas of their own culture, religion, tradition and so forth.

6. Recommendations

After getting the final findings, the researchers intended to provide some recommendations regarding EFL teaching to the Chakma students at the elementary level in Bangladesh such as-

a) Making a friendly environment in the classroom for the Chakma students.
b) Helping the Chakma students in making friendship with other non-tribal students in the classroom
c) Giving importance to the Chakma language, culture and tradition in teaching English language to the Chakma students.
d) Understanding the Chakma students' psychological stages of learning.
e) Allowing the Chakma students to use Chakma language in the classroom, if it is needed.
f) Recruiting EFL teachers from the Chakma ethnicity or such teachers who have good command over Chakma language and culture.
g) EFL teachers should have good understanding in Chakma language and culture.
h) EFL textbooks should be developed separately for the Chakma speaking children.

7. Conclusion

Ethnic groups are like blessings for Bangladesh and as the largest ethnic group of the country, the Chakma people have enhanced our heritage with their own linguistic and cultural background. So, it is our duty and responsibility to ensure the right of education for them. Besides, for their betterment it is essential to help them in learning English language. As the tribal people are underprivileged and deprived in our society, they need more time to cope-up with the different environment in the classroom. So, it is important to come closer to them through their own language. By emphasizing on their own linguistic and cultural background, it will be easier to teach them English as a foreign language. Moreover, understanding the students' psychology will help in getting a better and an effective result in EFL learning at the elementary level.

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