

The Higher Secondary English Textbooks in Odisha: An Assessment of Content Suitability

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning of English in the Indian context is predominantly textbook-driven. In a developing country like ours where language classrooms are unusually large and crowded, with defective seating arrangements, and where supplementation of modern teaching aids, workbooks, and teachers' and learners' guides are a far cry, textbooks enjoy a status of indispensability as the primary teaching tool for language learning. In Odisha, English textbooks for higher secondary students is prescribed in the form of anthologies, that is, a collection of writings (prose and poems) by eminent writers, without any specific target audience in mind. In order to make the materials suitable to classroom situations, the topics are adapted and simplified by the editors. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the reading materials in relation to ELT components prescribed in the detailed text, 'Invitation to English-1'. Adopting the in-depth internal (McDonough and Shaw, 1993) evaluative method, the materials brought to our study are found to be defective and inappropriate on a variety of fronts. The findings aim at highlighting the significance of modifying existing texts, which are meant for intensive study.

Keywords: English textbooks; Reading materials and language skills; Materials evaluation.

Introduction

Textbooks are unarguably conceived as the universal component of English language teaching (Hutchison and Torres, 1994), as they provide the base for language learning in a systematic and organised way. Since appropriate reading materials, interesting language activities, and suitable cultural context form the essential elements of a textbook, they are widely considered as the "visible heart of any ELT program" (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237), and are used as reliable sources of input for language learners in EFL contexts (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). Further, textbooks

are not mere carriers of the written and spoken materials, but include materials that ensure activities are performed by learners; they lend themselves as navigators and road maps for amateur teachers to secure confidence and adopt new methodologies in the classroom (Cunningsworth, 1995; Grant, 1987).

So far, the academic ambience in the state of Odisha is in question; textbooks occupy a prime position in the formal education of our students. In the absence of other teaching aids, such as handouts, charts, maps, newspaper clips, and audio-visual aids, the

textbook remains the most dependable tool, both in and outside the classroom. Moreover, our approach to academic administration and teaching is dominated by the top-down method that subsequently prevents teachers from exercising the requisite freedom to deal with difficult situations, even inhibiting them from producing their own materials. Consequently, materials are developed by a group of specialists in the form of textbooks to be used locally by another group across the state. To match the changing needs of the learners, English textbooks in Odisha change from time to time, in accordance with certain modifications implemented in the course curriculum. Hence, evaluation makes it possible to realise the needs for modification and provides a scope for judging the utility of the contents in the given texts. In addition, ELT materials are a close reflection of the aims, objectives, methods, and values of the teaching programme (Cunningsworth, 1995), and an evaluation of these aspects would considerably help teachers to develop a systematic and accurate insight into the overall nature of textbook materials. Being a dynamic process of investigating the suitability and appropriateness of an existing practice (Rea-Dickens and Germaine, 1992), evaluation turns out to be an effective tool for all those involved in textbook-making, to promote development of innovations and modifications within the teaching-learning context.

Theoretical Background

Successful achievement of the objectives of the ELT programme largely depends on the type of reading materials prescribed to the learners. While selecting texts as reading

materials, the textbook makers must take into account important criteria like suitable themes, linguistic and stylistic levels of the chosen material, readability, potential for classroom exploitability and testing, and the amount of background knowledge required for appreciation of the materials. The hallmark of a good text lies in its multifunctional facets. A text, in order to be ideal, should lend itself to a variety of uses and exploitability in and outside the class. With different functions, a good text facilitates testing of various kinds. As Bright and McGregor state (1970), “in addition to being enjoyable and worth studying, a good examination text must have enough in it on which to base different sets of questions for a number of years”. A natural consequence of these demands is that texts should not be too long. It not only fails to induce interest in learners, but also poses a challenge for examiners to frame questions that cater to the cognitive skills of learners. Exploitability is the next most important quality of a text material (Nuttal, 1982). Socio-cultural proximity is equally important, and Cunningsworth (1984) opines that the merit of a specific cultural setting is that it ensures a series of familiar situations for the presentation and subsequent practice of language items as it stimulates interest among learners.

Purpose of the Study

English at the higher secondary level is primarily taught with a series of objectives like promoting learners’ communicative skills, broadening other language skills like writing, reading, and understanding, along with promoting learners’ overall language

learning abilities for future academic and career purposes. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the current English textbook at the higher secondary level, specifically bringing the reading material of the detailed text into examination. It is worth mentioning that four textbooks, *Invitation to English-1*, *Invitation-2*, *Invitation-3*, and *Invitation-4*, popularly known together as the Invitation series, are prescribed for higher secondary learners in Odisha. Out of these four books, *Invitation-1* is fundamentally prescribed for intensive reading, whereas the rest are meant for extensive reading (non-detailed), writing practice, and grammar, respectively. This paper is focused on evaluating the detailed texts in *Invitation-1* that contains intensive reading materials along with language activities, and is developed with the objective of promoting language skills of learners. Hence, the present study seeks to find out:

1. To what extent the materials are appropriate for classroom exploitability
2. How far the materials, independently, contribute to teaching of English at the higher secondary level
3. Whether the materials facilitate the implementation of language pedagogy as envisioned by the syllabus and textbook makers

Methodology

Evaluation of ELT textbooks can be undertaken by adopting a variety of methods on the basis of a predetermined purpose. Though experts and scholars have prescribed diverse methods and approaches at different points of time, the impressionistic approach,

checklist method, and in-depth method (Cunningsworth, 1995; McGrath, 2001) are found to be convenient, effective, reliable, and widely used. In-depth evaluation examines the representative features of particular language elements in the materials “to see how far the materials in question match up to what the author claims as well as to the aims and objectives of a given teaching program” (McDonough and Shaw, 1993, p. 64). In the present study, a combination of the impressionistic and in-depth internal evaluation of the reading materials was conducted in relation to their thematic, linguistic, and socio-cultural suitability.

Findings

Invitation to English-1 is prescribed for intensive reading. Higher secondary level learners are adolescent learners of the modern age. They discuss a variety of topics in their conversation. If the texts are to match the topics that the learners are generally interested in, then the editors should pay attention to a variety of areas and different genres of writings. The book contains 20 lessons with prose pieces and poems. The prose section contains ten topics, which include a collection of short stories, articles from newspapers, biography, and autobiography. The poetry section comprises ten poems, only one of which is written by an Indian author. Of the remaining nine poems, six are very old poems written by British and American poets (The list of lessons prescribed in the book is enclosed in the appendix). A major drawback is that the book is prescribed for students of three streams: Arts, Science, and Commerce.

Unfortunately, the topics are highly technical, and incomprehensible with difficult language and unsuitable themes.

Inappropriate materials

The two texts on science, 'The Cancer Fight, From Hiroshima to Houston' and 'Development of Polio Vaccines' are the most inappropriate, which any editor with a sound knowledge of ELT should have rejected. The former mostly centres on Ritsuko Komaki and her exceptional contribution towards the treatment of cancer. The thorough examination of the text reveals that the topic is too scientific and technical to comprehend. Density of information, statistical data, and the presence of technical and scientific vocabulary make the lesson beyond the grasp of young minds. How will students from Arts and Commerce streams comprehend such a specialised topic on science? Difficult words like 'ionising particles', 'pneumonitis', and so on, are not glossed. Moreover, how would English teachers explain terms like 'thoracic malignancies' and 'neutron contamination'? Do the editors want the students to learn content or skills? There are hundreds of popular and simple writings on cancer which would have helped the students understand the disease and learn English; the current text, however, serves neither purpose.

Similarly, the text 'Development of Polio Vaccines' is highly technical, and is loaded with scientific narration, specialised terms, phrases, words, and biological acronyms. The topic is infused with information, historical record of events, and statistical data. Scientific terms like 'endemic region', 'immunocompromised', and 'gastrointestinal tract' are included. Specialised words like

'antibodies', 'enterovirus', 'RNA', and 'cell culture' in the glossary carry only dictionary meanings, which serves no purpose in comprehending the text.

Another authentic text, 'The Magic of Team Work', an adaption of the article written by author Sam Pitroda, deals with the significance of teamwork and the principal role it plays in substantial growth and governance in the corporate world. Although the theme is good and useful, the context of the topic is not appropriate. The text refers to complex philosophy and concepts of Indian work culture, such as 'sycophancy' and 'psychiatric dichotomy', which are inappropriate for the learners. Conceptual intricacy and language complexity of the text will never cater to the interest of our learners.

Language difficulty

Although the prose pieces have relatively good and interesting themes, the topics contain a number of difficult and unfamiliar words. 'In London in Minus Fours', written by American writer Louis Fischer, is an extract from the biography of Mahatma Gandhi, 'The Life of Mahatma Gandhi'. Some sentences are syntactically complex. There are also instances where the language may look simple and easy on the surface, but the meaning has complex philosophical and political connotations. For example, "Isolated independence is not the goal, he asserted. It is voluntary independence. Liberated colonies show treasure their new-found independence; they think it is a viable reality. But the law of nature in love, friendship, work, progress and security is creative interdependence" (p. 32). The text has around 46 glossed words.

'On Examinations' is an autobiographical extract from the second chapter 'Harrow' of Churchill's autobiographical book, 'A Roving Commission: My Early Life'. The theme is in agreement with the level of the learners; however, the obscurity of meaning rooted in the complex syntactic structures and heaviness of vocabulary dominates the text. In other words, an engaging theme is overshadowed by linguistic complexity. The lesson contains around 35 glossed words like 'discernment', 'invidious humility', 'epigram', and so on.

Another example is 'The Portrait of a Lady' written by Khushwant Singh. The theme is amusing. However, the language is marked with scintillating literary vibrations that would gratify the intellectual and literary cravings of adults with a mature sensibility. To expose young minds to such language may not cater to the need of promoting language skills, especially when content is not our priority.

Socio-cultural irrelevance

If the events, incidents, and anecdotes given in the texts are familiar, the learners can relate to the texts. Such familiar context facilitates language acquisition. Unfortunately, most of the prescribed texts have the least or no relation to aspects of our learners' socio-cultural background. The topic that critically suffers from a foreign and hostile context is 'On Examinations'. The author, Churchill, narrates some interesting anecdotes about his early school education. However, everything, from the nature of examination to the school campus, is alien to the learners. For example, the text refers to terms like 'House of Commons' and 'Chancellor of the Exchequer', which are outrageously foreign

concepts for our learners. Similarly, 'The Cancer Fight, From Hiroshima to Houston' and 'Development of Polio Vaccines' contain names, places, and description of events that are unfamiliar to our learners.

Inappropriate poems

The objectives of teaching poetry can be accomplished only when the materials/poems selected can be used inside the classroom. However, some of the poems that the anthology has included hold thematic constructions that are not appropriate for the learners in question. Poems like 'Oft, In this Stilly Night', 'A Psalm of Life, Money Madness', and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' focus on complex psychological themes like death, separation, philosophy of life, moral human values, and human consciousness.

Two ballads, 'The Inchcape Rock' by Robert Southey and 'The Ballad of Father Gilligan' are prescribed in the text. As a literary genre, while writing ballads, poets often use poetic figures of speech such as personification, symbols, metaphors, onomatopoeia, and so on. Ballads as a form of poetry often contain old words. For higher secondary students, learning poetry is not about critically appreciating poems with all their poetic figures, rhyming schemes, and metrical pattern, but rather, a means of enhancing linguistic skills.

Other features that the reading materials in the textbook incorporate are as follows:

- a) Improper and scanty comprehension questions
- b) Inappropriate pre-reading/lead-in

- c) No introduction to the text
- d) Difficult texts with no adaption
- e) Improper grading

Conclusion

If the primary objective, as spelt out in the preface and in the syllabus, is to develop language skills, the editors should prescribe lessons that are interesting and readable, without much conceptual and linguistic difficulty, with fewer foreign concepts and contexts, which may be used for various classroom teaching purposes. Unsuitable and inappropriate materials deter the implementation of interactive or communicative methods inside the classroom. In other words, materials and methods have their own separate routes, and teaching will be reduced to mere explanation and learning to mere memorisation. As a result, the objective of teaching is defeated.

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APPENDIX

Invitation to English-1

Prose

S. No.	Topic	Author
01	Standing up for Yourself	Y. Yevtushenko
02	The Legend Behind a Legend	Hariharan Balakrishnan
03	The Golden Touch	N. Hawthorne
04	In London in Minus Fours	L. Fischer
05	The Cancer Fight, From Hiroshima to Houston	Ristuko Komaki
06	My Greatest Olympic Prize	Jesse Owens
07	On Examinations	Winston S. Churchill
08	The Portrait of a Lady	Khushwant Singh
09	The Magic of Team Work	Sam Pitroda
10	Development of Polio Vaccines	Bonnie A.M. Okonek and Linda Morganstein

Poetry

S. No.	Topic	Author
01	Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	Robert Frost
02	Oft, in the Stilly Night	T. Moore
03	The Inchcape Rock	Robert Southey
04	To My True Friend	A. Pinard
05	Fishing	Gopa Ranjan Mishra
06	Daffodils	W. Wordsworth
07	The Ballad of Father Gilligan	W. B. Yeats
08	A Psalm of Life	H.W. Longfellow
09	Television	Roald Dahl

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