

Status of ESL in Assam: An Agenda for Improving Learners' Proficiencies

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ABSTRACT

There have been many public initiatives at improving the skills of learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the state of Assam. However, the results have, at best been, mixed. On the other hand, organizations like the British Council and other non-profit organizations are currently engaged with public schemes, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, to create a more incisive impact of their own initiatives at improving ESL proficiencies among the students of Assam. This paper deals with the current state of ESL in Assam and some innovative activities currently being undertaken in the state schools and suggests a public agenda to make such initiatives more effective.

Keywords: *ESL proficiency; ESL activities; Macro skills.*

Introduction

Those who speak English and speak it well may never realise the significance of the concept of English as a Second Language (ESL), or even that it exists. For those who do not speak English, or encounter difficulty in speaking the language, however, an ESL education can prove to be the best in helping them learn better and correct English. ESL gives the learners a better opportunity to grasp this nearly-universal language. It is considered important in countries where the English language is dominant in areas of business and education. Indeed, in some developing countries like India or others in South Asia, the rise in the social or economic ladder is directly and strongly related to one's ability to use English. ESL is normally a fundamental component of education for

learners who first learnt to speak a different language at home. Proficiency in English is often important not just for learners who seek jobs and careers that involve travel, trade and communication, but also in almost all vocations involving some communication with internal or external stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the difficulty in ESL training in the urban areas of India, it is a challenge particularly in the rural areas as they suffer from inadequacy of qualified and experienced ESL teachers and, in many instances, find the costs for teacher training prohibitively high. Rural areas are also less likely to have policies for making adjustments for ESL learners. A particular challenge is the prevalence of pressure groups (often emerging as political

constituencies) in these areas which hold and propagate the view that a second language is less important compared to the first, i.e. the mother tongue. Indeed, in the entire South Asian region there appears to exist two diverse schools of thought in this context: one supporting English language and another expressing aversion to it (Shah, Farooq and Shams, 2010). These challenges make it difficult for the teacher to impart ESL education to the target rural area groups.

However, ESL in rural districts enjoys certain advantages as well. The ESL teachers have a better connection with the community and the guardians of the young learners who can be of immense help in

establishing a healthy home-to-school connect. In rural areas, a single ESL teacher may have only a few students, enabling a very effective one-to-one communication, leading to the learners getting personalized attention.

ESL in Assam

Assam is the largest state by population in North East India. Although the official language of the state is Assamese, it is a multilingual state (see **Table 1**) and, in that sense, a microcosm of the diversity of India. Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Manipuri and their various dialects are spoken by different communities.

Table 1: Speakers of Major Languages in Assam

Language	Native speakers (%)
Assamese	53.08
Bengali	29.96
Hindi	6.40
Bodo	5.29
Nepali	2.30
Manipuri	0.63

Source: *Census of India, 2001* (reproduced in the *Economic Survey of Assam, 2010-11*)

The state of Assam has been chosen for the study since its multilingual status makes it reflect very well the plurality of India. Besides, although considerable efforts have been made in promoting English language in the state, there is not much by way of evidence-based research on these efforts or their impact in the mainstream academic literature. This study, therefore, is also an

attempt to bridge the gap between the status of ESL in this remote and less-developed state and what is known about it from the available academic literature.

The state follows a 'Three Language Formula' in its educational system. In the vernacular medium schools, English is introduced in standard I¹. The language is

¹ This is a relatively recent change from the earlier policy under which English used to be introduced in standard V.

studied as a compulsory subject up to the Matriculation (10th Standard) level. Thereafter, it is studied for two years (up to the 12th standard) and three years at the under-graduate level. In other words, English is studied as a core subject for 15 years. Yet, the general subsidiary status accorded to English both at the curriculum and instructors' levels leads to poor English language skills among students.

Rahman (2011), Dutta (2012), Awal and Rout (2013) and several other researchers confirm that most schools in Assam, particularly those in the vernacular medium, have largely failed to provide quality education in English language. Indeed, some surveys find that the students are often 'scared' of English and that a good number of students every year pass the 10th level board examination at the mercy of the examination board in the form of 'grace marks' (Rahman, *op. cit.*). It is believed that even some of the otherwise bright students from vernacular medium schools may fail to achieve the standard achieved by students from the English medium schools only because of their low attainment in the English language. Because of their inability to speak fluent English, a good number of such students show poor performance in interviews for job recruitments (Rahman, *op. cit.*) and, even when they do, they may not be able to communicate well in day-to-day transactions where English is required, resulting in low self-esteem and obstacles in career progression. In other words, there is a perceptible long-term impact arising from the contrasts in the levels of attainments between the students of these two categories of schools in Assam.

There have been studies on the relationship between the socio-economic status of students in Assam and their English language skills. Awal and Rout (*op. cit.*) carried out an extensive primary survey and used statistical methods to test the strength and direction of the relationship between these two aspects. Their study concludes that parent income affects the reading ability positively and parental education could be responsible for improving students' English language reading ability.

Current Need and Importance of ESL in Assam

The liberalization of the Indian economy has suddenly opened a plethora of opportunities for pursuit of employment and academic interests of the youth in Assam, whether within or outside the state, which require considerable command in all skills of English language: listening, reading, writing and speaking. There are now call centres that need not only staff but also trainers to equip their employees with communication skills; there are multinationals who have been recruiting marketing staff who, in turn, need to be taught spoken and written English; there are medical transcription centres which need efficient translators and reporters. Those desirous of seeking higher education in North America or Europe need professional help in clearing tests like the IELTS and TOEFL. Hence, the avenues where English language skills are required in Assam are unlimited today (Rahman, 2013). Perhaps the most glaring evidence of this change, which is less than two decades old, is the mushrooming of spoken English coaching classes. There are regular

advertisements for these in local dailies of Assam as well as discussion in newspaper articles about the impact of such facilities (Lais, 2005).

Initiatives at Enhancement of ESL Capability

The British Council has designed numerous activities and tasks for the benefit of young learners to improve their proficiency in ESL. The British Council, through its Trainer Development Program for Master Trainers in Assam, is working with the Government of Assam and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Assam to impart training through these tasks and activities in about 35,000 government primary schools across the state under its initiative called 'Aim Higher in Assam' (AHA). Till 2012-13, 460 Master Trainers were trained over three phases. Apart from this, the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Gauhati University has designed courses and provided workshops in which training is imparted with focus on improving the proficiency of learners in ESL. Recently, a team of eminent professors have joined together to form an NGO with the objective of improving the condition of ESL at the primary level in the schools of Assam.

There have been some initiatives on the part of the state government, too. The Assam government recognizes the importance and fundamental role of English language for the progress of the people in so far as it is an effective tool for modernization. Towards this end, the English Language Teaching Institute, Assam (ELTIA), an autonomous organization, was set up on 4th Sept 1986, under the Department of Education,

Government of Assam. The institute aims to promote the teaching and learning of English in Assam, train teachers of English and improve the syllabus, textbooks, examination system and related matters in the state.

In most of these initiatives, understanding the requirements of a particular area, tasks are designed according to the needs of the target audience. Accordingly, to the extent that differentiated treatment to ESL has taken the differentiated needs of the audience into consideration, the impact of the initiatives has been different. For example, activities designed by some private agencies, such as those by the British Council, have reportedly been found to be popular among the ESL learners of the rural areas in Assam. Many of these initiatives have started a battery of innovative tasks and activities for the learners of ESL, to which we turn next.

Activities for Improving Proficiency in ESL

The National Curriculum Framework emphasizes the importance of the four skills: "Speech and listening, reading and writing are all generalised skills, and children's mastery over them becomes the key factor affecting success at school." (National Curriculum Framework for Second Language Acquisition, 2005, sec. 3.1.3).

The British Council and several other organizations have identified a number of fun-based activities and tasks, designed to improve learners' proficiency in ESL in government as well as private schools of Assam. These activities focus on the four macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading

and writing. Apart from these, the building blocks of language, namely vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, are also focussed upon. Surveys and media reports indicate that many of these activities are at various levels of implementation in the schools of Assam. The activities, which appear no more than interesting games, are described below:

Listening Skill

- a) **Dictation and running dictation:** The speaker dictates words or sentences and learners respond accordingly.
- b) **Deduction from voice:** A simple statement is repeated in a variety of ways from which students try to deduce according to the way it is said. This focuses attention on what the speaker means rather than the words used.
- c) **Chinese Whisper/Word of Mouth:** A word is given to the group leader who whispers it to the student next to him/her. This continues until the last student comes out with the correct word.
- d) **Step-by-step:** A city map is prepared so that it has drawings of streets and other landmarks. One student starts from a point and asks another student for directions. The other student is then to give directions accordingly. One who reaches the destination becomes the winner.

Reading Skill

- a) Students practise planning a reading lesson based on a text from one of the course books. Pre-reading stage, while-reading stage and post-reading stage are to be included.

- b) Some jumbled lesson plans are given for reading. The learners are to read them and arrange them in order. After arranging the lesson plans, the learners are to find out as to which stage of the lesson plan falls under the three categories of pre-, while- and post-reading stages of a reading lesson.
- c) Learners make lists of advantages and disadvantages of reading aloud.

Speaking Skill

- a) **Play adjectives:** Every learner adds an adjective to his/her name and the process continues.
- b) A topic is introduced to the class and every learner is to speak a few lines about the topic.
- c) The facilitator picks up any object from the classroom and the learner speaks about the object.
- d) Every learner introduces himself/herself to the class.

Writing Skill

- a) The teacher takes some alphabet blocks and asks the learners to arrange them so that they form meaningful words.
- b) Some words are jumbled and the learners are asked to arrange them in order to form a meaningful sentence.
- c) A topic is introduced and a few lines are written by the learners about the topic.

The Way Ahead

The economic reforms over the past two decades have provided an impetus to the economic growth of Assam, albeit in ways which have less impact than that witnessed in other developed states of India. Much of

the immediate economic impact of liberalization on Assam has been in the creation of jobs outside the state, making the local educated youth relocate to far-off locations (particularly the metros of India). The immediate effect has been to create a huge demand for qualified speakers/writers as well as trained instructors in ESL, translators, medical transcriptionists, reporters, teacher educators and English language professionals in print and electronic media. However, as we have noted earlier, despite the recent government and non-government push for instilling ESL skills in Assam, there is still much to be achieved as revealed by the formal examination results as well as independent surveys. Hence, there is a need to fine-tune existing policies and programs and explore innovative ways of addressing the challenges related to quality education in ESL. This calls for micro level planning at all levels of imparting education: primary, secondary and tertiary.

The Assam Human Development Report (2003) recognizes the need for flexible, alternative strategies for special education to disadvantaged groups, as well as the requirement of bridge courses in ESL from school level to the post-school levels. Secondly, there needs to be a provision for incorporating locally relevant materials and activities in ESL curricula. As we have noted, there is already a great demand for ESL and this demand can be effectively met only by serious preparation and publication of textbooks, workbooks and teacher's handbooks by incorporating the views and opinions of local experts and the local community. This approach is possibly also

important for decentralization of ESL curriculum so as to mitigate the gender gap, rural-urban divide and the gap between elite and deprived groups (Rahman, 2013).

Rahman (2011) makes some micro-level suggestions for implementation:

- a) ESL teachers need to be given intensive pre-service training. The training should include micro and macro teaching, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) basics, lesson planning, designing group/pair activities, basics of phonetics, setting question papers, use of audio-visual aids, preparation of teaching aids and evaluation techniques.
- b) The English textbooks prescribed by SCERT should have a teacher's handbook and a workbook, the former containing guidelines for the teachers and the latter containing exercises in primary, secondary and advanced skills for the students. The textbooks should help develop language skills and practical application of English in day-to-day activities.
- c) School libraries should be provided with English language learning materials like books, magazines, audio cassettes, CDs with songs, grammar activities, pronunciation exercises, word drills, and so on. Teachers' resource books, guides, dictionaries and pronouncing dictionaries should be made available to all English teachers.
- d) Grants should be allotted to schools for the purchase and use of audio-visual aids in English classes.
- e) At present, the only assessment that matters is the year-end examinations administered by the state or central

boards, and students prepare for them by cramming answers to likely questions. Assessment should be made a continuous process with unit tests, assignments and oral examination.

- f) Summer classes should be organized which should help students who have little opportunity to use English or learn it at home.

Conclusion

While there may be constituencies which advocate the idea that supporting ESL education is pointless, there is no getting around the fact that ESL and its instruction is a non-negotiable factor for the social and economic development of a relatively backward state like Assam. As discussed in this paper, some initiatives by public and private bodies to promote ESL in the state have taken place with encouraging results. However, for long-term, sustainable effect, particularly in the unique socio-political and economic context of Assam, it is necessary that English should be taught as a language, not as a content subject. Most significantly, the pedagogy, including the process of instruction and evaluation, needs to manage the process of learning and enhance the communicative competence of the learner, rather than promoting rote learning.

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www.britishcouncil.in;

www.learnenglishkids.org.uk;

www.teachingenglish.org.uk.

Department of ELT, Gauhati University:

www.gauhati.ac.in.

www.primary-education-oasis.com