ARE BOTTOM-UP PROCESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES SUSTAINABLE?: A MINOR STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Motivation for Research: The urge to master the English language is quite dominant in India for the sheer reason that it can lead to social mobility and even help one acquire a job. But the absence of practice which is a pre-requisite for mastering any skill has resulted in millions in India failing to master the English language despite learning it for twelve years in schools and perhaps an additional two years at the Under Graduate level too. The investigator for over a decade, had been serving as a Resource Person for English Language empowerment programmes in Kerala, particularly in the rural sector and found that   neither a language enrichment programme of one week or even one month durationon a daily basis following the bottom-up process is likely to result in any significant improvement or lead to social mobility.

Statement of the Problem: English language we know brings with it a cultural baggage and there are many in India who perceive the language as oppressive. While the fact remains that for many the 'difficulty' to master the English language arises from own failure to 'use' the language regularly, the obvious reason for failure to master the language is the fear of making mistakes and the likelihood of ridicule. Further, there is no real follow-up after the   short term empowerment programmes.

Objectives of the Study: The main objective of the study is to find out the nature of the bottom-up model of English language empowerment programmes. The specific objective is : 1. To find out whether short duration   English language empowerment programmes organized   for the rural community   are sustainable in nature. 2. To suggest ways of plugging loopholes if any in the current English language empowerment programmes for rural learners.

Methodology: The data for this empirical and analytical study was collected in the participant observer study mode by the investigator. Following teaching sessions employing the bottom-up process during short term English language empowerment programmes, informal interviews with participants were conducted to find out whether the programmes benefitted the target group in any way.

Findings: The study found that the   bottom-up process unlike the top-down process which is advocated by agencies like the British Council is quite appropriate for empowerment programmes particularly in rural areas. But the failure on the part of participants to use the target language regularly, results in no significant improvement in own English language competence. The bottom-up process of language empowerment programmes unfortunately turn a blind eye to the cultural dimension of language which in turn affects proper acquisition of the language for own improvement.

Further, even if a person approaches the language with a positive frame of mind with sufficient motivation, the absence of someone competent enough to empathetically assist in correcting the errors one makes, can result in lack of progress in ones effort to master the language after attending the bottom-up process of language empowerment programmes.

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***Novelty/Author's contribution towards creation of new knowledge*:** The investigator suggests that one time hit-and-go empowerment programmes fails to produce the desired objective of transforming learners and should be replaced by short term programmes on a regular basis for the same target group. More significantly, it is high time that Resource Persons stopped underplaying cultural aspects while teaching a foreign language like English especially if the goal is to avoid clumsy use of the target language, viz English. Alternatively, to make the empowerment programmes sustainable, given the recent surge in online learning, well chalked out online training sessions in addition to face-to-face programmes may be given to enable aspirants in rural areas to improve own English language competence*.*

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Introduction

Sustainability is the process of living within the limits of available physical, natural and social resources in ways that allow the living systems in which humans are embedded to thrive in perpetuity.

- University of Alberta's definition of sustainability

Any skill requires practice for improvement, refinement and perfection. 'Language', unlike a subject like History or Science, is less knowledge based and so continuous use is essential for mastery. In the case of one's mother tongue (L1) the learner in the normal Indian classroom gets the opportunity of using it in own house on a daily basis and outside the home on a regular basis. So it is only natural for the learner to gain mastery in using L1 which is acquired than learned. This is not so with the case of a language like English which is a Second Language (L2) in India. The learner of English has to learn to pronounce the word, pick up the spelling, grasp its contextual meaning and consciously learn semantic and syntactic aspects.

Skills like speaking and writing require plenty of practice. But unfortunately in the case of most Indian learners, particularly in rural areas, either they don't find people to interact with in English or they are hesitant to use English for communication, more out of fear of making mistakes or because of the possibility of being made fun of. Naturally, they tend to withdraw only to grope in the dark for a way out of their plight. Many might have an inherent desire to learn/master the English language but lack the right environment or assistance. Here it would only be redundant to add that those adult learners in rural areas who are not pursuing higher studies have none to turn to for improving own competence in English. So, attending empowerment programmes is seen as the only way out of the conundrum they are caught in.

Many researchers have found that English is the language of socio-economic mobility particularly for disadvantaged communities. (Vaish, 2005; Weber, 2014). David Graddol's much discussed book, *English Next India* identifies three main drivers for greater use of English in India - Education, Employment and Social mobility.(2010,p16). The Engage website recently posted an article with a revealing title: English Language Education in India: 'How Aspirations for Social Mobility Shape Pedagogy'(1) So, it is only natural to find many youth in India, keen on attending empowerment programmes particularly in English.

Statement of the Problem

A popular adage reads: Strike the iron when it is hot. So, NGO's, and agencies keen on offering short term courses both for cultural transmission and fostering own business prospects like the British Council and teacher associations have all engaged sessions on English language empowerment. (2) The investigator, a teacher educator by profession and one of the mentors of empowerment programmes organized by a teachers' association soon found that the one-touch-go empowerment programmes, seldom fail to be sustainable. Moreover, the target group who attends the programmes soon fall back to their same level which they were prior to the empowerment programme. This prompted the investigator to undertake a minor study.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Bottom up Approach (in Language Empowerment Programmes)**

      Bottom-up process begins with the basic units of the text. The learners are introduced to basic forms, and meanings are presented in a repeated fashion to enable learning. This is followed by phrases and sentences with mentor support. In short, the journey from the bottom end to the top end commences with spelling and pronunciation, moves on to individual words and bigger units of language and ultimately a paragraph and dialogue.(Garside,2021)

- **Top Down Approach (in Language Empowerment Programmes)**

      Top down process unlike the bottom up process has direct teacher control. The activity, the conversation and the specific output is guided by the teacher. It works on the assumption that the learner has the background knowledge to predict the meaning of the language they are listening or reading. In empowerment programmes, the mentor would begin by immersing participants in all aspects of learning English immediately, including writing, reading and pronunciation.

Sustainable

      Being sustainable implies the ability to continue at the same level for a period of time. (Cambridge dictionary) Learning becomes sustainable when educational practices contribute to a healthy learning ecosystem in which knowledge is co-created and shared in the community.(Center for Learning) Teaching becomes sustainable when students are given the skills they need for life-long learning outside of the classroom. (The English Classroom). Sustainability also implies living within the limits of available resources which enable humans to thrive in perpetuity. (University of Alberta)

Objectives of the Study

      The main objective of the study was to (1) Find out whether short duration English Language Empowerment Programmes are sustainable.(2) To propose solutions for drawbacks identified if any.

Methodology

      This empirical analytical study follows the participant observer study mode, in which the investigator served as mentor-cum-resource person for an empowerment programme organized by an organization. Following a close analysis of the activities of the programme, informal interviews were conducted with the participants to find out whether the programme was beneficial and sustainable.

Findings

- During English language empowerment programmees, participants tended to show a sense of confidence.

- The mentors of empowerment programmes rarely focus on cultural aspects of English.

- Following the empowerment programme, the organizers never do a follow up. Language is a skill that needs continuous practice to improve, but participants of the empowerment programmes receive no empathetic assistance after the programme on how to use English correctly.

      All the three main findings are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

- During empowerment programmes, the mentors or resource persons create the right ambience for learning by building the confidence of learners who struggle to use English. Then, through graded pair work and group work along with interesting fun filled activities makes the participant feel that he/she too can use English with confidence. This confidence building abruptly ends before long, for language we know requires conscious learning, reading, acquisition of vocabulary followed by regular use for practice. This seldom happens and with the passage of time, many participants who have attended the empowerment programme, revert back to the same level of English language competence which they had prior to attending the English language empowerment programme. In short, most English language empowerment programmes even if they follow the bottom-up process which begins with the basics of the English language, fails to be sustainable.

- It is an accepted fact that particularly in cities in India, the English language has an elitist status and there are many in India who perceive those who speak impeccable English with awe and admiration. This in some instances triggers the inferiority complex of individuals who lack English language competence especially when one compares own inability to master an elitist

language with those who have the same mother tongue, but speaks impeccable English. Such participants when they attend empowerment programmes, fail to focus on the cultural aspects, particularly non-verbal aspects of communication including values, customs and habits. Incidentally, those who offer empowerment programmes, never focus on the cultural aspects for the obvious reason that they know being receptive to cultural aspects requires a particular mindset. It has often been found that those who attend the empowerment programmes hold their own culture in high esteem and perceive the British culture as inferior. That is to say, if the mentor of an empowerment programme, focuses on cultural aspects, some participants are likely to distance themselves from the activities resulting in a failure or even withdrawal from the empowerment programme. In short, the wide chasm created through the failure to acquire/grasp or consciously imbibe the cultural element is found to be pronounced in rural learners. The ultimate outcome is a clumsy use of English, sans appropriate gesture, accent or grace in using the language.

- Festivals like Deepavali in India, celebrate every year the success of good over evil, rejuvenate our spirits and ultimately make oneself withdraw in thought and deed from doing evil for immediate gains. While the effect such annual festivals produce is more psychological in nature, the purpose of one time hit-and-go English language empowerment cannot be just psychological. The investigator found that many empowerment programmes assiduously arouse learner confidence to use the English language, and also provide tips for mastering the language. But when the participant, following the empowerment programme, begins to use the English language which is skill based, he/she falters and would need an empathetic mentor to correct the mistake one makes. The problem with the empowerment programmes is that once the programme is over there is no connection with the participants! The publicity and perhaps the money which the organizations collect through registration fees for organizing the programmes is what drives them to continuously organize empowerment programmes. They fail to realize the real needs of the learners and abysmally fail in providing sustainable assistance.

Suggestions for making the Bottom up Programmes Sustainable

- Given the growing interest and familiarity with online learning, continued assistance at least on a weekly basis should be provided by the organizations. This is one way of making the empowerment programme sustainable.

- It would be a good idea to introduce communication skills in varied contexts as an essential component of the empowerment programme.

- Alternatively, increasing the frequency of empowerment programmes particularly by NGO's and non-profit organizations in a hybrid mode is likely to be more beneficial than the one-time-hit-and go-type empowerment programmes now being organized for millions of aspiring youth in India.

Limitations

The inferences related to the drawback of English language empowerment programmes were drawn mainly from the ones the investigator attended as a resource person. It is not sure whether organizations with sufficient capital are engaging follow up sessions after the initial offer of subsidized or free English language empowerment programmes.

Summing up

The study has tried to highlight the flaws of empowerment programmes aimed at improving the job prospects of learners particularly in rural areas. It has also proposed the introduction of online programmes in a follow up mode to make the bottom-up model of empowerment sustainable.

References

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English Language Teachers' Interaction Forum, a teacher fraternity regularly organizes empowerment programmes for rural learners and has for its mission "Empowering rural India through English language education."

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