

## **Role of RBSE English Textbooks in Multicultural Classes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The focus of the paper is to present an analysis of RBSE English textbooks in secondary classes of Rajasthan from cultural point of view. In an average classroom in Rajasthan, despite the learners coming from different cultures, they share an underlying common thread but when it comes to foreign culture, they are at a loss to comprehend the text. It poses serious hurdles for the learners; as a result the students lose interest in learning English and the teachers in teaching it. In RBSE affiliated schools the students come from remote villages having different manners, language, custom, caste, background, culture, religion and competence level. The paper is an attempt to analyse the textbooks of English at the levels mentioned above from the point of compatibility with needs of both learners and teachers. So the paper will bring to light the anomalies which the presenters came across during the course of their survey and analysis.

### **Introduction**

Textbooks are a key component in teaching English as a foreign language because they provide the basis for the content, take into consideration a balance of skills to be taught and define the kinds of language practice the students need to take part in. Much of the language

teaching that happened throughout the world today cannot take place without extensive use of textbooks. However, if we talk about the textbooks running in schools affiliated to Rajasthan Board of Secondary Education (RBSE), we realize that little attention is given to incorporate sufficient material to help the learners build grammatical and communicative competence.

The main problem with the present textbooks is the socio-cultural disconnect. Tudor (2001) points out that the socio-cultural dimensions of communication and the cultural contents intervene significantly in language use and therefore, culture cannot be ignored in designing and framing the syllabus for English language teaching. Language and culture are interrelated and language learning can be facilitated by having a careful selection of cultural related materials in textbooks. But right from the time English was introduced in RBSE affiliated schools, the standard of the textbooks was kept very high, completely neglecting the actual needs and background of the learners. As a result students developed a phobia about English. Over the years the lessons kept on changing but the socio-cultural context remained the same to which neither the students nor the teachers could ever connect.

The RBSE textbooks are a replica of NCERT books at secondary and senior secondary levels and have been adopted by RBSE without in the least bothering to justify the reason for doing so. Most of the lessons of these textbooks have been written by foreign writers and the students of RBSE schools who come from remote villages are not able to connect to the alien culture. No serious research has been done to make the lessons student friendly or relate them to familiar situations and characters, which is completely unjustified.

Today English is the dominant language of trade and commerce, news and information in this world of globalization. It is the language of higher education, research, communication, medical and engineering study and the ladder for upward social mobility. Not only this, it is an essential need of today, that students studying at secondary and senior secondary levels should be able to cope with it. The material and methodology, both should be reassessed because the textbook does not motivate the students or create interest and inclination towards English in general. Now a days we see a changed scenario in terms of English. The focus has shifted from reading and writing to speaking because the current job scenario demands a more communicative learner. Hence drastic changes have to be brought about in the textbooks.

### **Cultural Analysis of *First Flight***

The present textbooks at secondary and senior secondary level are non-compatible with the actual needs of the learners. The major hurdle that comes in the way of learning of English is cultural unfamiliarity on the part of the learners. The stories, essays, poems incorporated in the textbooks are removed from their field of experience because they have been written by foreign writers. Not only this they have long sentences, difficult and complex structures and vocabulary that dampen the interest of the students in learning. There is a wide disconnect, as a result of this English is being taught in schools as a subject and students are not learning it as a language. Use of Indian cultural context may be very helpful in developing a positive attitude in learners toward English. So the paper tries to analyse one of the textbooks used at secondary level to check the validity of the text material. The present paper focuses on some of the lessons from the Xth class

textbook, *First Flight* which is based on a survey conducted on the teachers and students from RBSE affiliated schools.

In the first lesson “A Triumph of Surgery” the writer James Harriet talks about pet dogs and how they are pampered by their masters who are foolishly indulgent. The story is set in England and the kind of setting and scenario depicted is somewhat unimaginable for the students. Needless to say, quite a few middle class homes might keep dogs as pets but the treatment meted out to them can never fit in with that described in the lesson. In most rural homes, the children are only aware of stray dogs that are only destined to get that one first *roti*. The dogs might be play things, could give a good chase or be chased for fun but never get the kind of attention that is described in the lesson. The favorite dishes and the tweed coat from a whole wardrobe are unthinkable as are the beds, toys, cushions and balls of all sorts. However, the psychological point of our indulging because of loneliness can be transferred to such behavior towards children, but that too not to the excess that is narrated here. Thus the context might lead to some after class humour and fun poking but would not leave an indelible impact on the minds of the readers as a supplementary text ought to.

The story would be a little less appealing to the learners of Rajasthan as the environment is extraneous to the native culture of the learners. The learner may not feel at ease with the cultural context that has been created in the story. The story may not hold the interest of a learner of English as all the names are totally alien to his culture. The kind of humor and subtle irony that are provided in the story hinder the acquisition of language. In other words the story is not

direct and it requires additional effort to comprehend the humor and irony behind the intended surgery.

The next lesson “The Midnight Visitor” is once again set in a distant part of the world depicting Ausable, a secret agent, is stretching the imagination of our students too far. This Sherlock Homes kind of story is a context that features spies, detective and the like, which have no one to one correspondence in our own culture. The whole emphasis is on making Max believe that there is a balcony outside his room points to the presence of mind of the protagonist. Had it been brought out in another context, like an Akbar Birbal episode, the teaching of “the ability to think” spontaneously in a precarious situation, calmly and wisely would have been commendable. The point being made here is, why load the young mind with contexts that are not easy to imagine, when India has no dearth of its own heritage of stories. Why should our own pristine store of *Katha Sarit Sagar*, *Panchtantra* and other such resources not be exploited? We have translations now available mostly through the good offices of the National Book Trust of India and herein, the English used is simple and the context more familiar.

“The Rattrap” by Selma Lagerlof, a Swedish writer, is the story of a vagabond set amidst the iron minds of Sweden. Though it is akin to a fairytale, yet it establishes the importance of benevolence, kindness and empathy which are virtues capable of transforming even criminals. The point of trouble for the learners is, comprehending the metaphor of the rattrap used right from the beginning to the end of the story. Culturally such learners would equate a similar situation with a web or net or something similar. The learners would also not be able to understand the currency (kronors) of the land. Christmas, which is the most important festival of

the Christians, has an altogether different spirit from that of Indian festivals like Diwali and Holi. The questions that may arise in the mind of the students are: why even after knowing the true identity of the peddler, Edla continued to entertain him and why is she entertaining a guest who is not so important and what is so important about the Christmas evening.

Apart from this, from the cultural prospective we find that Edla, the daughter has a stronger say than her father which is again very different from the perspective of an Indian family in which it is usually the father who has the final word on all decisions taken in the family. Moreover a girl bringing a stranger home is also a kind of cultural shock to the students. But the transformation of the peddler towards the end of the story and realization about his wrong deeds because of Edla's generosity, trust and kindness gives the students a moral lesson which even our scriptures talk about.

“The Third Level” by Jack Finney gives us an altogether different scenario of a city (New York) in the developed world (US). Philately (stamp collection) is a rare hobby with even urban children and adults. For most of the RBSE students coming from villages and small towns, this would be an unusual hobby. Not only this, the very idea of hobby is quite remote for these learners who spend their free time working in the fields.

The other idea of the third level in a metro station is far beyond their understanding as most of the students have not even visited a local railway station in their vicinity. The names of places, characters, the description of the addresses and underground metro station are far removed from the field of experience of the learners. Moreover, hobbies by people in the west are taken up as a medium of escape from the reality of the world around them. Hobbies for them

are a way of lowering their stress, worries, fears and tensions. The lesson poses a challenge for RBSE learners because there is intersection of time and space in the story. It vacillates from 1894 to the present time.

Even the learners are not much familiar with the difference in currency. They have no idea about dollars and cents. The lesson also becomes challenging because of interweaving fantasy and reality. The practice of first day cover of stamps is known to the urbanites and that too in developed cities. So this lesson is quite difficult for RBSE learners as it does not provide them any familiar context.

Another lesson, “Misbil the otter” again has a very unusual setting and context. Having a pet otter and situating the story in Iraq and London, both take away the comprehensibility and the students find it hard to visualize the whole story. Undoubtedly catching hold of large lizards commonly found around ports and putting them in gunnysacks for fun and to frightening friends or transporting such pet across continents is an unimaginable situation for students in the desert state of Rajasthan for whom the very sight of a water body is rare. However all said and done, the insights with the feeling and thoughts of an animal are a learning point and would have had much more impact if the animal had not been so far removed from our students’ imagination.

Despite the geographical and cultural distancing there are some interesting lessons like “The Necklace” by Guy De Maupassant and “Bholi” by K A Abbas. These are very much closer to the students who liked these stories in the survey conducted. The story about borrowing a necklace from a rich friend and losing it, then working hard to replace it, not knowing that the earlier one was not real becomes a story that parallels in many parables. The story binds a

relationship with the readers. The French names and forms of address which are culturally different do not seem to affect comprehension.

## **Findings**

Apart from the above observations about the respective chapters in *First Flight*, the following findings come out of the survey conducted:

1. The present textbook of X is neither student friendly nor teacher friendly.
2. It does not create interest in students because of the cultural disconnect.
3. It adds to the frustration of students because of this disconnect.
4. This textbook does not cater to the present communicative and job-related needs of the students as it does not focus on all the four skills (LSRW).
5. The vocabulary and structures used are very difficult. The length of the chapters dampens the interest of the students.
6. The students consider English as an unnecessary burden. As a result, they do not bother to read the original text.
7. Syllabus designers are not given enough time and freedom to prepare textbooks.
8. School teachers hardly have a role in preparing the textbooks.
9. The traditional translation method is used to teach this text which results into dryness.

## **Suggestions**

On the basis of the above findings the following suggestions can be offered to syllabus designers, teachers and educationists:

1. There should be a survey of actual needs and competence level of the students before preparing the English textbooks for them.
2. Subject experts should be invited to design the syllabus.
3. These syllabus designers and textbook writers should be given a refresher course so that they can prepare authentic and need based textbooks.
4. Teachers should be trained accordingly.
5. Textbooks should be attractive, colourful and interesting.
6. Handbooks for teachers, practice books and workbooks for students should be well prepared.
7. There should be more pictorial representations in the textbooks.
8. Communicative teaching should be encouraged in classroom: Translation of texts should be discouraged.
9. More indigenous texts should be included in the textbooks.
10. There should not be any gender-bias while selecting material for the textbooks.
11. The editor should give a proper glossary and the explanation of difficult words at the end of each and every chapter.

## **Conclusion**

From this brief analysis of one of the textbooks, *First Flight* in RBSE affiliated schools we get an idea about the fascination of our textbook editors for including foreign writers who have written exceptionally well. The honest intentions of providing our students a diversified perspective and exposure to stories written by writers from different lands are not at all

questionable. What is missing is the identification of the actual competence level of the teachers who have to teach that text in the classroom and the comprehension level and exposure that the students studying English in remote areas of Rajasthan have. If this gap can be bridged by including stories as chapters which are close to their field of experience, a lot of justice can be done to textbook designing.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire for Students

Dear student,

This questionnaire is aimed at finding the challenges of communication in English. It is to form the basis of my doctoral research. Your inputs are vital. You can rest assured that your identity will be kept confidential.

Thank you.

DD Gupta

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Medium of instruction by the English teacher: English Hindi/ Bilingual

#### Questionnaire for Students:

1. Do you like the English textbooks in your syllabus? Yes/No

If yes, what is the reason for your liking it?

- (a) pictorial representation
- (b) local context
- (c) simple language
- (d) all of them

2. If you do not like your English textbooks, what changes do you want in them?

- (a) pictorial representation
- (b) local context
- (c) simple language
- (d) all of them

3. Do you want a bilingual (English-Hindi) text? Yes/No
4. How do you want the lesson in English to be taught?
- (a) in Hindi
  - (b) in English
  - (c) mix of Hindi and English
5. Do you want the lessons to give you
- (a) the local (Rajasthan) context
  - (b) the national (India) context
  - (c) the international (Global) context?
6. Are you always keen to attend your English class? Yes/No
7. If yes, is this keenness because of
- (a) the teacher
  - (b) the lesson
  - (c) both
8. What are you learning English for?
- (a) for job
  - (b) for communication
  - (c) out of compulsion
9. Can you identify your actual need(s)?
- (a) grammar
  - (b) vocabulary
  - (c) communication
  - (d) all

10. Are the textbooks able to cater to these needs?

(a) completely

(b) partially

(c) not at all

11. Do you consider learning English a burden?

Yes/No

12. Which is your favorite lesson from your textbooks?

13. How do you handle the text?

(a) read the original text

(b) read its summary from passbooks

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire for Teachers of English

Dear Sir/Madam

This questionnaire is aimed to form the basis of my doctoral research and the information will be used only for academic purpose. Your inputs are vital and the questionnaire is in no way a test. You can rest assured that your identity will be kept confidential and only the data will be used.

Thank you

DD Gupta

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Institution's name and address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Contact No.: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Qualification \_\_\_\_\_ Teaching Experience \_\_\_\_\_

#### Questionnaire for Teachers

1. Are the students able to understand the lessons in English? Yes/No
2. Are the students able to relate to the cultural and social scenario in the textbooks?  
Yes/No
3. Does the teaching of a particular lesson require translation in the mother tongue?  
Yes/No
4. Are the students able to connect better to a lesson by an Indian writer?  
Yes/No

5. Are the students not able to understand a chapter written by a native English writer?  
Yes/No
6. Do you think the prescribed textbooks in the syllabus are relevant to the needs of the students?  
(a) partially relevant  
(b) completely relevant  
(c) irrelevant
7. Do the textbooks target all the four language skills? (LSRW) Yes/No
8. Do the students consider learning of English a burden? Yes/No
9. If yes, what do you think is the reason behind it?  
(a) textbook  
(b) teaching method  
(c) socio cultural background  
(d) all these factor
10. Do the students learn English from the point of view of career? Yes/No
11. Are students aware of the job openings that English can provide? Yes/No
12. Is the syllabus catering to the level and present day needs of the students?  
Yes/No
13. Do you think you are well-trained to cater to students' needs? Yes/No
14. What change would you like to suggest in the textbooks to make them more student-friendly?  
(a) pictorial representation

- (b) local context
- (c) simple language
- (d) all these factors

15. Do you think lessons in textbooks should be based on Indian cultural themes?

Yes/No

16. Should the emphasis of the textbook be on

- (a) creative writing
- (b) factual writing
- (c) humorous writing
- (d) a mix of all

17. Is there any difference between the textbooks prescribed in the previous syllabus (*Course Reader* and *Rapid Reader*) and the present one (*Footprints without Feet*, *First Flight-X*)

Yes/No

18. Which text do you prefer?

- (a) the previous ones
- (b) the present ones

19. Were the students more comfortable with learning through:

- (a) the previous ones
- (b) the present ones

20. What do you think is the reason for this choice?

- (a) cultural familiarity
- (b) simplicity of language
- (c) both

21. Do the students ever read the original texts?

Yes/No

22. Which is/are your favorite lesson(s) in your textbooks?