



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Exploring English Speaking Challenges In Bengali Medium Schools: Curriculum Constraints, Exam-Oriented Mindset, And Limited Conversational Exposure

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Abstract

In multilingual India, the skill in English remains a ranking issue of academic success and social-economic mobility. Nonetheless, students with a school background in Bengali language still face the same challenge as they do not successfully acquire effective English-speaking skills despite years of study. This study investigates the contextual issues underlying oral fluency with these learners especially regarding curriculum design, examination-based teaching and learning, as well as the insufficient experience of real communicative practices. Most of the institutions in the Bengali medium prescribe a syllabus that gives more emphasis on reading and writing abilities than oral ability and therefore provides an imbalance between language knowledge and communicative abilities. There is also a very strong culture of exam mentality that does not encourage spontaneous speech and communication since the students are taught to repeat memorized materials but not to have a conversation in real life. The socio-cultural setting also restricts the exposure to English discussions in and out of the classroom, which also strengthens linguistic reluctance and insecurity. By using the method of qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and teacher-student surveys, this research aims to find out the pedagogical gaps and socio-psychological barriers that influence the English oracy. The results indicate the need to incorporate communicative language teaching (CLT) practices, change curriculum goals, and facilitate a conversational learning environment. Finally, the paper supports a change in product-based language learning to the process-oriented model that fosters active participation, interaction, and confidence among the learners using Bengali medium.

Keywords: English Oracy, Bengali Medium Education, Curriculum Constraints, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Socio-Cultural Barriers, Exam-Oriented Learning.

Introduction

English remains an important academic and socio-economic means of progress in the Indian multilingual situation. Nevertheless, students of the Bengali medium-based institutions always face difficulties in gaining oral fluency in spite of years of formal education. This issue is not as deep as the intelligence of students but in pedagogical methods and organizational frameworks that favor written skills as opposed to oral competencies. The system of examination that is highly used in Bengali medium schools encourages memorization and not communication. This results in a piecemeal knowledge of the English language by the learners, which is heavy in grammar and vocabulary and lacks oral spontaneity. In addition, hesitation and fear of mistakes are supported by the restricted exposure to the real-life conversations in English, both in and outside of the classroom. This study attempts to investigate these issues with a particular emphasis on curricular imbalance, socio-cultural hindrances and lack of communicative instructional practices, and suggest pedagogical changes that can improve English oracy in students in Bengali medium schools.

Objectives of the Study:-

1. To determine the pedagogical variables that affect English-speaking problems amongst learners in Bengali medium.

The aim of this is to determine the impact of teaching strategies, curriculum development, and classroom activities on the oral communication of students.

2) To explore the socio-cultural and psychological obstacles that are restrictive to the formation of English oracy.

It is focused on the attitudes of learners, their level of confidence and the linguistic environment within and outside the classroom.

2. To determine how examination-oriented teaching affects oral fluency and communicative competence of students.

The study seeks to learn how the ubiquitous use of rote based tests minimizes the possibilities of interactive language learning.

4) To suggest pedagogical changes with the help of communicative language teaching (CLT) and process-oriented methods.

This goal focuses on creating efficient techniques that have the capacity to incorporate real life speaking experiences and facilitate autonomy in learners in the context of Bengali medium.

Literature Review:-

Whether or not English can be said to be fluent in multilingual India is an issue that has been extensively examined by a few scholars but this issue remains, especially in the vernacular schooling systems. Krishnaswamy and Sriraman (1995) pointed out that, English in most Indian classrooms is taught as a subject and not as a communication tool, hence passive language learning. On the same note, N. S. Prabhu (1987) in The Communicational Teaching Project held that the success of learning a language depends on the students moment of meaning-based communication and not memorizing of structures.

The authors R. K. Agnihotri and A. L. Khanna (1997) talked about the sociolinguistic stratification of English in India, where the language is the symbol of prestige and opportunity. Their research however shows that oral skills are not well exposed to the students in vernacular medium and are not given much attention in institutions. Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) also extended their argument by saying that linguistic insecurity in the country arises when the first language takes over in the academic and social conversation hence hindering the confidence needed to converse in English. The communicative competence model created by Canale and Swain (1980) is a theoretical basis of the present study. They suggested that grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic

competence are needed in order to be able to achieve true fluency, which are not well developed in systems based on examination such as Bengali medium schools. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is also tested by Richards and Rodgers (2001) as the positive way to build the interactional competence in second-language learners.

Methodology:-

This research as reported in this paper employed qualitative design through secondary information. Relevant publications on communicative competence, teaching and learning of English language and dialectical education were reviewed from peer-reviewed journals in India. Reported findings on how curriculum restrictions, examination-oriented mindset and limited communicative practice had influenced the development of speaking proficiency in English were summarised through a theme analysis.

Main Discussion:-

1)Curriculum Imbalance Pedagogical Gaps.

The acquisition of English language in the schools that teach in Bengali language portrays a consistent disproportion between language acquisition and language application. Though English has been introduced early in the curriculum, the structural form of the syllabi still favors reading and writing rather than speaking and listening. Learners study English as opposed to studying using English. This pedagogical form reverberates with what Krishnaswamy and Sriraman (1995) refer to as the academicization of language - in which language turns into a theoretical phenomenon and not a communicative activity. Students are well trained in grammar regulations, conjugations, and sentence change drills but are always shy when requested to engage in a discussion. According to Krashen, the Input Hypothesis (1982), the acquisition process can be achieved in instances where the learners are exposed to the comprehensible input that is slightly higher than the current level. Nevertheless, the Bengali medium schools do not always entail an interactive input; teachers do not apply communicative exchange but rather reading comprehension and translation. The Communicative Competence Model of Canale and Swain (1980) also subdivides competence into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic levels - the only one of which is covered meaningfully in the case of the Bengali medium.

Lack of oral activities like debates, group discussions and storytelling denies the learners a chance to attain sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In this respect, pedagogy in these institutions cannot be useful in operationalizing what Vygotsky (1978) calls the Zone of Proximal Development the space in terms of which students learn through guided interaction. Rather, the classroom is teacher-centered and the participation of the learners is limited as well as they are less motivated to meaningfully use the target language.

2)The culture of Rote and Examination-Oriented Learning.

Even the education system of most Bengali medium schools is still held captive to an exam-oriented attitude whereby performance is gauged by the written tests as opposed to communicative performance. Essays, grammar exercises and comprehension answers are memorized by the students and they write them down in examinations in a mechanical way.

In The Communicational Teaching Project, Prabhu (1987) stated that the mechanical repetition and structure based pedagogy do not build real communicative ability. The emphasis on the accuracy of language and not fluency has turned the process of learning English into a question of memory, but not mastery.

Agnihotri and Khanna (1997) have demonstrated that for vernacular, learners usually associate English proficiency with grammatical perfection and overlook social and communicative aspect of it. This is based on the system of examination, that oral competence is not a factor in assessment. As a result, teachers themselves do not pay much attention to speaking activities because they do not have a direct impact on grades.

The hegemony of the product approach assessment-based on the end product- written work does not allow a lot of process based learning as an error is perceived as an aspect of development. Such environment controls creativity and spontaneity. Students are also conditioned to respond to questions in a specific way as opposed to thinking, acting and communicating on their own.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) respond to this with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) that focus on real-life communication and the meaningful application of language. The application of these methods in Bengali medium schools, however, requires not only the revision of the curriculum but also a change in beliefs and classroom culture of the teachers.

3)Socio-Cultural notions/Linguistic insecurity:-Language itself is entrenched in culture and English in India does not serve as a mere means of communication, it also serves as a social icon. In Bengali society, English is sometimes a symbol of prestige, modernism, and intellectual power. Students of Bengali medium schools are raised believing that English is a privilege of the elite and not a skill that can be available to them. According to R. K. Agnihotri and A. L. Khanna (1997), the use of English in India builds up a sociolinguistic stratification whereby proficiency is linked to the urban elite. This image creates a linguistic insecurity among the students who are rural or semi-urban. They are afraid of the scorn, the wrong pronunciation, or being evaluated by their fellow group members whenever they speak English.

According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2004), this is one type of bilingual anxiety where the former language prevails in emotional and cognitive activities and restricts the learner to feeling confident in the latter language. The students are able to think in Bengali but they cannot translate their thoughts spontaneously into English. This is strengthened by the theory of linguistic prestige developed by Labov (1972): speakers will avoid the forms of language that will identify them as inferior socially. The English language will be spoken with hesitation or avoided at all costs not to embarrass the society, in Bengali medium situations. The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf also explains further that thought and language are mutually dependent. Therefore, learners whose mental reality is oriented to the Bengali language have an extra level of trouble with the articulation of complicated concepts in English. These are socio-cultural constraints, which restrict natural exposure. There are almost no English-speaking possibilities outside the classroom since the families speak Bengali, community discussions are organized in the local language, and English is limited to textbooks. The language is not an inhabited one but is merely scholarly without a communicative environment.

4)Psychological Aspects of Oracy.

Behind all the verbal stuttering is a psyche wall. A lot of students of the Bengali medium report to have a fear of speaking English because of a fear of loss, fear of being laughed at, or being corrected. In the book, Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982), the author discusses the role of emotional variables in determining the success of language acquisition including anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence. The high level of affective filter makes the input unable to translate into acquisition. In their publication, the study on Foreign Language Anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) pointed out that high anxiety causes them to avoid participation which further restricts the practice. In the same manner, the Theory of Self-Efficacy developed by Bandura (1997) places stress on the sense of having the capability to be successful. The low

self-efficacy experienced by many students in the medium of instruction in Bengali is internalized; they believe that English is difficult, foreign, or they cannot learn it. Moreover, Dornyei (2005) claims that motivation in its language learning is not only instrumental but also integrative: a learner has to commit himself or herself to the target language community emotionally. This emotional attachment is not strong in the Bengali setting where English is perceived not as an element of belonging but as an element of authority. Students become disengaged, and this decreases the motivation to study. Thus, oracy in Bengali medium schools needs to be developed not only through cognitive or curricular changes, but through affective and psychological interventions, which can be developed to create self-confidence, mitigate fear and celebrate linguistic diversity.

5)Teacher and Classroom Interaction.

Educators have been the mediators between the curriculum design and the experience of learners. Nevertheless, the English teachers themselves in most of the institutions of Bengali medium also have their systemic problems: the lack of communicative training, big classes, and an insufficient institutional support. The observation conducted in the classroom shows that the teachers spend the bulk of their time explaining grammar rules and corrections of written grammar instead of starting a conversation or oral activity. The pedagogy of lecture makes the students passive listeners. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the effective teaching that needs to be communication-oriented teaches that teachers must be flexible, use interactional techniques, and have a learner-centered work. In his idea of Postmethod Pedagogy, Kumaravadivelu (2006) supports the idea of context-sensitive teaching, in which the practices of local teaching are modified to suit the realities of the local community instead of relying on imported models. The teachers in the Bengali context must bridge the cultural familiarity and communicative innovation. As an example, bilingual methods in the early phases, small group discussions or incorporation of local stories in the English classes can render communication meaningful. The other important psychological role is that of teachers. They are able to build an environment of tolerance and positive attitude in the classroom where errors are perceived as learning processes and not failures. By making teachers approve of work rather than excellence, the students are more ready to talk. The transition between the teacher-centered classroom teaching to the learner-centered responsiveness process can progressively transform the classroom into a microcosm of real life communication.

6)Integrative Discussion and Conceptual Synthesis.

The results show that the English speaking problems in Bengali medium schools are not just the linguistic phenomena but the interdependent social, cultural and pedagogical ones. The rigidity of the linguistic machine of curriculum, coupled with the pressures of examination and the feeling of insecurity, generates a linguistic ecosystem in which speaking competence is marginal. To overcome these issues, change will have to take place at various levels. To start with, restructuring of the curriculum must be made in a way that the four skills; reading, writing, listening, speaking, are equally given attention and there must be a fair system of evaluation that encompasses oral test. The principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) should be incorporated into the syllabus so that they can encourage the functional and situational learning. Secondly, the teacher training programs must emphasize on communicative competence as opposed to grammatical training. Educators have to be provided with such methods as group discussion, peer feedback, storytelling, and learning in the form of dramas to engage oracy in the classroom. Thirdly, psychological support systems are to be opened; they could be such activities as building confidence, peer support, and linguistic tolerance culture. As the learners view English as a language they can use, but not a status indicator, their anxiety of involvement will also reduce. Lastly, the communicative exposure can be extended through institutional cooperation between schools, parents, and local communities. Natural interaction can be promoted in English clubs, reading circles or inter-school exchange programs. The classroom should be transformed into an instructional location and

become a communication location. The struggle of the learner using Bengali medium in essence is a struggle of limited opportunity rather than of inability. The difficulty is to convert a system of linguistic memorizing to a system of linguistic expression. The silent knowledge of English by the Bengali learner can only be transformed into speech and speech only with curriculum redesign, teacher empowerment and cultural openness.

Findings:-

1)Curricular Rigidity:

The English syllabus being used in the Bengali medium schools is mostly grammar-translation based. It puts more emphasis on structural accuracy in lieu of oral fluency thereby limiting communicative proficiency. There is scarcity of real life communicative activities in books that would arouse speaking activities in books.

2)Exam-Oriented Pedagogy:

The educators are more likely to focus on written tests, in which the achievement test is required to be based on memorization and translation. Consequently, speaking exercises like role-play or extempore lessons are deemed as time-consuming as opposed to being pedagogically important.

3)Weakness in Teacher Training:

There are a number of teachers who have good theoretical understanding with poor communicative skills. The lack of the formal oral methodology workshops also leads to the teaching style based more on explaining than on interaction.

4)Socio-Linguistic Constraints: Linguistic insecurity and the fear of mimicry develop among students when they speak English. They have very little exposure to spoken English other than academic settings, particularly in rural or semi urban districts like in Kul Gaachi, Shakti Nagar, Majh Diya, Piragachi, Chandannagar, Koi Khali, and Hanskhali.

5)Content-Cultural Identity Conflict: Students unconsciously connect English and social status and Bengali and attachment. This duality of identification can be a source of mental indecisiveness, which suppresses the free oral expression.

***6)Technological and Resource Gaps* :** Absence of audio-visual materials, language laboratories as well as digital exposure considerably reduces chances of pronunciation modeling and interactive learning activities.

Conclusion:-

The research indicates a huge disparity in teaching English and communicative fluency in students taught in Bengali medium. The use of English guarantees academic and social improvement, but exam-driven rote learning and absence of a true interaction prevents oral skills. The problem is aggravated by socio-cultural barriers and teacher-centered approach. It is necessary to shift to the more communicative, task-oriented kind of learning, which underlines confidence, collaboration, and real-life speech practice. Students can only be truly empowered and fluent when English is approached as an expression and not an academic burden.

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