RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEXT AND CONTEXT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING : FINDING A PLACE FOR MULTIPLE VOICES AND MULTIPLE REALITIES

MANISH KUMAR

Lecturer (English), Directorate of Education, Delhi
R/o A-883, Palam Extn.-I, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that English Language Textbooks can act as a source to sensitise young learners by giving space to multiple-realities specially of those groups which are marginalized. Building upon the theoretical constructs of Ramin Akbari and Yuonne read the paper goes on to analyse some textbooks, which are innovative in nature. Textbooks of English prepared by Pipa Stein in South Africa and textbooks prepared by SCERT, Kerala have been analysed keeping in mind representation of multiple realities and multiple voices in them.

Key words: Multimodality, gender, power, subject, social function, multiliteracy, meanings, messages, switching

Most books in language address the concerns of middle and upper middle classes, this seems to be true for all other subject areas too (Yashpal committee, 1992). RaminAkbari (2008) points out:

"The majority of course books used for English instruction have been anesthetized to make then politically and socially harmless for an international or transnational audience. Most publishers advice coursebook writers to follow a set of guidelines to make sure that controversial topics are kept out of their books. One such set of such guide lines is summarized as PARS NIP (Gray 2001), which stands for politics, Alcohol, Religion, sex, narcotics, Isms and pornography. As a result most coursebooks deal with neutral, apparently harmless topics such as food, shopping or travel, however, there are many groups in society, which are driven to the margins exactly because their political, behavioural, or belief systems are in conflict with those of the mainstream groups and they are denied certain rights or opportunities."

The society cannot change unless controversial topics are not hushed but brought into focus by integrating them in textbooks and educational practice. For example poverty in learners immediate society is not normally treated, it is shown to be a phenomenon which exists in far offplaces. Past NCF 05, when textbooks with critical awareness as aim were produced, there was a silent protest from the privately managed schools as to the relevance of their context for urban children. But in response to such contention, it can be argued that overrepresentation of certain groups and its values must be balanced with inclusion of themes from underrepresented groups, and poverty as such is a very much urban phenomenon.
Akbari (2008) emphasizes:

"In addition to some guidelines (or maybe we can say redlines) provided by publishers, some course book producers and writers either intentionally or unintentionally set themselves restrictions in refusing to recognize and represent certain groups of people who might not fit in exactly with the expectations of their middle and upper class language learning clients.. Missing also in most coursebooks are psychological or physical abnormalities; one can hardly find any lessons dealing with the plight of amputees, or the disabled, and if psychological problems are dealt with, only cases with which the public is fascinated (such as autism or idiot savants) are represented. Old people are also left out of English coursebook contents, and if old age is mentioned, it is normally associated with disabilities, frequent hospital visits, and the frustrations of losing one's strength. "

What Akbari argues is that the coursebooks for English must recognize the fact that there are multiple perspectives on reality, so all Voices' must find space in coursebooks, not just the familiar and the immediate.

Yuonne Read (06), has this multiple perspectives on reality sought to be represented in English books, when she argues for 'imagining the subjects', or to 'understand how English comes to be 'produced' in the interaction of a multiplicity of factors at work in the classroom (Kress, 05)' In other words how the subject is presented in a course book depends on how the 'subjects' are imagined.

By subjects, Read means to describe interior life or selfhood in relation to gender, power, language, culture and politics. The 'multimodality of the subject has to be kept in mind while designing course books for English. Read used foucoult's concept of 'technologies of the self in describing how subjects are imagined. Comber (1996) as quoted in Read (06) makes the following observations:

"Foucoult's concept of technologies of the self can be applied to a number of moves in educational discourses which emphasizes self-regulation, self assessment, behavioural management and self awareness (Metacognition, metalinguistic awareness). In such pedagogical practicesthe pedagogical imperative is directed at producing particular kinds of self-knowledge and self-control in the student" (1996, 41).

Read goes on to point the fact that designers and produces of textbooks imagine learners as particular 'kinds' of subject, through which they construct the positions for them (the students and the teachers). This 'positioning of subjects' leads to the choice of discourses represented, visual designs choosen, selection of knowledge and choices of activities. So coursebooks, do have a 'powerful social function' in socializing learners and in legitimating Vhat counts as cultural norms and officially sanctioned values and knowledge, argues Read. The 'Social function' of coursebooks become much more powerful in absence any other linguistic input, which seems to be the norm in India and the developing world, where English is taught as a second language.

Read argues for representation of 'collective identities' in textbooks as a pedagogical tool for multi literacies. There is a need to understand and use language in ways that take into account 'cultural subcultural, regional'/national, technical, context specific differences, argues Read. Pipa stein identifies the major pedagogic challenge for language and literacy teachers as to 'render knowledge as material culture', in other words, to helps them transform what they know, remember, sense, feel and believe into a paragraph of writing a lively dialogue, or a scrapbook of images (stein, 2000 as quoted in Read).

Multi literacy in text books: the new London group (2000) identifies four elements of multi literacies that needs to be considered in designing activities for the learners. Read mentions them as:

Situated practice in which learners previous and current experiences as well as their extra school communities and discourses are recruited into learning experience.

- Overt instruction in which the teacher scaffolds the learning andintroduces and unpacks the necessary metalanguage with the goalof giving learners 'conscious awareness and control over what isbeing learned',
- Critical framing in which learners constructively critique andextend their learning as a starting point for transformed practice.
- Transformed practice in which teachers support learners to 'designand carry out, in a reflective manner, new practices embedded intheir own goals and values.'

Most of the coursebooks do not offer opportunities for learners to offer constructive critique of the practice, they are involved with. Read makes the point explicit, the designers see their task as preparing learners to accept the status Quo. In Foucault terms, they are to be disciplined into submission rather than encouraged to question current economic and social structures. They are to be 'inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning but not to be active designers of meaning and of alternate social (Read, 06) futures. It remains a challenge, to integrate macroscopic concerns with the microscopic world of the text book. Once the powerful social role of English texts is recognized they can be exploited as a fundamental source to bring about the critical change.

Example of an innovation text-book- the book is titled English today meant for class 7th graders of South Africa designed by Pippa Stein and her team. The first unit is 'SELF'.

The aim of the unit is:

Interacts in additional language

Demonstrates critical awareness of own language use. Uses language to include people, and not to exclude people.

Reads a text (fiction or nonfiction), notices how the text is constructed to represent a particular view of the world (point of view) understands in a simple way some elements of poetry (e.g. rhyme) and understands some of the terms used to describe these elements.

Reads for information: reads simple diagrams, summaries information.

Reads for pleasure: reads for fiction

Writes a personal reflection

Writes creatively shows development in the ability to write poems.

Uses some language to talk about language (metalanguage).

The spots and activities meant to achieve these aims has also been highlighted. The multiple points of view, of two teenagers; shows two different kinds of realities.

While for Teboho of free state, this is what he likes.

I like sleeping late

Listening to my favourite music

Winning a soccer game

But most of all

I like just being me.

It represents the reality of a urban-care free middle class teenager. The other picture is of contrast:

Yes, I am rich,

Filthy rich,

Am without diamond

And gold

No money

No money

But I have love and

I am loved

I have millions of starts

And bilions of trees

The deep blue sea

And the clear blue sky

That is all fine with me

For birds sing for me

And the sun shines for me

Rich I am.

This is a poem written by shoki, who could not go out to holiday on Christmas vocations because she did not have the money, and her mother told her that love was all she could give to her. The teenager was touched an penned her lines in this form.

Two poetical pieces provide two frames of reality even for a universal concept like 'teenage'.

In unit II, titles 'meanings and messages', the importance of oral texts and role plays of different situations involving different kinds of languages is highlighted. One of the important aims to be achieved as a form of speaking is the ability to debate "social and ethical issues: shares out roles, bring people into the discussion, interrupts politely; expresses opinions and supports them with reasons, expresses agreement and disagreement, switches language where necessary."

'Switching of language' is permissible in the class because speaking up' is more important than the goals of acquisition of English.

How imposition of English silences young children is demonstrated through following reading task in activity 10. Here is the paragraph.

WHY IS ADAH WORRIED ABOUT TITI

After a few weeks, adah noticed that titi stopped talking altogether. This surprised Adah because titi was a real chatterbox. In Nigeria and on theboat, she was a noisy toddler, talking and singing in Yoruba like all her friends. Adah was teaching her English sentences, and sometimes read her nursery rhymes, of which Baa Baa black sheeps was her favourite. But now she simply refused to talk. Adah worried so much about it and spoke to God about it in her prayers. Then one day a friend and classmate of hers came to visit them. Not having anything to give this woman, Adah decided to make her a book of custard. When her back was turned the friend started to tease in Yoruba, encouraging her talk. Tired of Titi's silence, Adah's friend snapped at Titi, "have you lost or sold your tongue? You used to talk to me in Nigeria. Why do not you talk to me now?" then Titi, the poor thing snapped in yoruba, "Don't talk to me. My dad will cane me with the belt if I speak Yoruba, and I do not know much English. Don't talk to me."Adah was so started that she spilled the hot custard she was making. So that was it! Francis, Titi's father, wanted their daughter to start speaking only in English."

Characters like Titi abound in second language classrooms in India, it is because of 'silence' of so many students in English classrooms, that critical pedagogues argue for inclusion of Li or mother tongue as a resource. It remains a challenge no doubt, but the English coursebookitself acknowledges the fact by giving importance to oral texts' as one of its aims of learning English as a second language. Can Yoruba' of Titi be used in English classrooms? Theoretically yes, but pedagogically itremains a challenge because it is considered interference in most of prevailing approaches in ELT.

The coursbook Tries to represent various sections of the community and their oral tradition like the 'Ostrich does not fly' is a story often told by traditional san communities around fire in the evenings. The story is told through gestures, miming, sound effects and animal noises. The entire unit 3 is titled 'signs and symbols', a paragraph for reading follows.

"You have probably learnt about the san people of south Africa. You know that san had a hunter gather culture. Small groups of hunters worked in bands to track animals and kill them with their bows and arrows. The hunters knew that it was important not to disturb the balance in the environment as all organisms depend on each other for survival. For this reason, the hunters only what they needed from nature. The environment they lived in was either open grassland or semi-desert. They knew animals they were hunting. So san hunters developed asset of sings or signals so that they could communicate with each other across a distance without speaking" (Pg 38).

Another unit "Breaking the silence" can be taken as an example of critical elements present in the course book. The unit has a. charter of south African children rights, before the charter, the concept of 'Rights' and how it came to be defined post apartheid in South African constitution in 1994, has been briefly introduced.

These are some examples of how 'subjects' come to be imagined in south-African textbook of English in the post apartheid era, where democracy came to be defined in a more egalitarian way, so the macroscopic concerns of society are reflected in the course book.

ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS OF KERALA AND THEIR SOCIAL CONTEXT:

English textbooks prepared under the DPEP programme in keralashowed the way broader social concerns can be integrated into English language coursebooks. Identifying the dichotomies related to process (DPEP Tryout Report 2000), it makes a. distinction between learning and acquisition. "There is a basic distinction between learning a language and acquiring a language. The intuitive idea is that there are two independent processes related to learning languages. Acquisition is a non conscious process learning is a conscious one.. The individual while undergoing the process of acquisition may not be aware neither of the process nor of its end result. When we talk about learning rules of grammer we mean the learning process not the acquisition process. Correction affect learning, not acquisition. "

The textbook series brought out by state council for educational research and training takes a whole language perspective and builds heavily on Chomsky1 theory of universal grammer, but what is of interest and relevance for critical pedagogy; is the 'themes' used in the coursebooks. Like in the class IV book of English brought about by SCERT, elephants, fishes, ponds come to occupy centre stage. The socio political roles of panchayat and police station are part of simple contextual stories.

The monkeyman and how angered parents cast all kinds of aspersion on such characters, is proved false, when the same monkeyman saves the life of their son.
Leena, the young physically disabled student pays tribute to her teacher.

The characters are truly representative of the Kerala society. The forest guard, bolu the elephant, fishes, ponds, milkman, the monkeyman..the context of language usage has a deep and profound role in its acquisition (DPEP, 2000)

The class IV textbook certainly meets the norm, not only that 'Malayalam' words are used quite frequently throughout the book infactlanguage planners in SCERT envision of primary classroom where a mixture of English and Malayalam is permissible and a slow switchover is argued for.

In the class VIII book, the social concerns remain but the content becomes more literary', and here literature' is not limited to 'English' literature but Svorld literature' (Russian, French, Panchtantra and so on).
The book also contains a self assessment tool for students to evaluate their own learning.

The transition from local to global literature can be demonstrated with the help of the unit on Ballad. The unit begins with the introduction of a balled as a story told in the form of a poem, and it has a counterpart in "Vadakkanpattu'!

The unit 2 titled 'on telling a tale' opens up with four pictures of covers of four kinds of tales 'Panchatantra Tales' aesop's fables, Indian fairy tales; kathaSarithSagara. The range of introduction classical Sanskrit, classical English Indian and keralitekathaSarith; is encompassing moving from local to the bigger picture or the unfamiliar.

In this paper it has been argued that textbooks occupy a central place in teaching learning of English as a second language, as most of primary literary resources exist in the mother tongue there is a certain kind of assumption about the teacher-learner (imagining the subjects), while designing textbooks. This understanding is necessary to highlight the importance of textbooks as sites of critical thought, in absence of anyother literary resource in second language. We have taken examples of south African textbooks and kerala state council of educational research and Training' books to analyse them on the twin factors of context and representation of macrocospic reality in these books, followed by a few sample pages from these books. Akbari, (2008) stresses the importance of text books with new approach and their place in critical pedagogy in ELT :

"The transformation of a society will be impossible unless trouble spots are identified, space is provided for all citizens to make their voices heard and all members of society come to the realization, that there are multiple perspectives on reality, by creating a sense of respect and tolerance, the first steps towards social change can be taken."

So when the nature of learner, or as Read puts it. "imagining the subjects" to design the subject coursebook, these aims as pointed by Akbari has to be considered.

Conclusion

Text books occupy the centre stage in language pedagogy. The design and content of textbooks must be representative of the diversity seen in society so that the learner develops a critical eye for multiple realities and multiple voices. It remains a challenge for textbook writers.

Bibliography

Documents

1. Position paper on teaching of English : NCF 2005-NCERT, New Delhi.
2. DPEP-SLAP-Second Language acquisition program – Tryout Report : 1999-2000 – Kerala State.
3. Yashpal Committee Report 1994, Ministry of HRD, Government of India, New Delhi

Text-Books.

1. English today grade 7 – Pippa stein and othes – Maskew Miller Longman Pine Land Cape Town.
2. English for Class IV and VIII – State council of educational research and training – Thiruvananthpuram-Kerala.

Journals

1. Akbari, Ramin : July 2008 : Transforming lives. Introducing Critical pedagogy in ELT classroom: ELT Journal Vol. 62/3 Oxford University Press.
2. Read Yvonne : 2006 Imagining the subjects : Yvonnerreedlanguages.wits.ac.2a.
3. Stein P. and New Field D, Jan. 2004, shifting and gaze in South African Classrooms : Thinking classroom Vol-5, Number.

Books

1. Apple W.M. 2008 : Can schooling contribute to more just society? Education citizenship and social justice sage publication, Delhi.