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Role of ELT in Upgrading the Underprivileged: Helping the Helpers

Abstract

It is an undeniable fact that English being a global language increases the chances of better employability. This fact has been well recognised by the fortunate sections of society. In order to bring about inclusive growth, it is now time to upgrade those who have been living a destitute life over the years by helping them realise the very fact. In India, one of the most common professions taken up by these underprivileged people is to work as domestic helpers. Sadly, most of these workers have been kept deprived of not only the deserved pay but also the requisite respect. In contrast, there are many places around the globe where the same kind of profession is considered to be a civilised and decent one. This paper aims in suggesting the role of ELT for an inclusive growth by improving the standard of living for these unfortunate helpers.

Keywords : ESP, English for domestic helpers, upgrading underprivileged, English for employability

Introduction

India is a vast country known for its rich cultural variation. The inhabitants of India vary remarkably in their caste, colour, creed, religion, and financial status. While differences in caste, colour, creed, and religion do not hinder nation's development, differences in financial status do. Also, the differences in the educational standards of the inhabitants have been a major barrier for development. According to a factsheet by UNDP, India has a massive population of over 1.21 billion as of 2011. The total literacy rate in India is around 74.04%, male literacy being 82.14% and female 65.46%. The website of the department of planning, government of India suggests that the annual per capita income in 2011-12 at constant prices was Rs. 38005. Although these figures are progressing with each year, they are still negligible in comparison to that of developed nations like United States of America or Australia.

In order to improve its standards, India has recently taken up the task of inclusive growth which aims in judicious income growth and income distribution. As is mentioned in the UNDP factsheet, it was recorded that in 2010, there were around 354.68 million poor people in India. Since this is a big number, it poses one of the biggest impediments for inclusive growth. This paper attempts to support the cause of inclusive growth at the deep level by highlighting the direct proportionality of English language competence and the income obtained in one of the most common professions of the underprivileged.

A Brief Literature Review on ESP

From the latter half of the twentieth century, enough emphasis has been laid on English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP can be regarded as the sphere of teaching English language to participants for distinct purposes mainly related with their professions. In his work, Strevens has talked about the absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. The absolute characteristics of ESP delineate that ESP helps learners by meeting their specific needs. It is related in content to "particular disciplines, occupations and activities," and it focuses on specific lexis, syntax, discourse, semantics etc. On the other hand, the variable characteristics highlight that ESP may be restricted to a language skill and does not have any "pre-ordained methodology" (1-2).

Teaching ESP should not be confused with teaching general English. Regarding the same, Hutchinson and Waters point out that the difference between the two is "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal" (53). While teaching general English focuses on all major aspects of English language and the four skills (LSRW), teaching ESP is greatly based on

learners' goals and purpose of language learning. Unlike teaching general English, teaching ESP can also aim in competency of any one skill.

Domestic Helpers in India

In India, one of the most common professions taken up by the underprivileged people is to work as domestic helpers. These help people in a variety of household services like housekeeping, cleaning, cooking, taking care of children and elderly dependents, and more of the same form. With the progression of gender equality in India, the need of these domestic helpers has increased in the past decade.

On the contrary, most of these workers have been kept deprived of not only the deserved pay but also the requisite respect. In contrast, there are many places around the globe where the same kind of profession is considered to be a civilised and decent one. In the following discussion, a suggestion has been proposed to improve the social and economic status of domestic helpers by encouraging ESP in their profession. The suggestion has been fortified by the results of a survey conducted by the researcher.

Methodology and Results

A general survey of five questions was conducted by the researcher with 100 participants from more than twenty five cities of India. Almost all the participants hailed from a different household, and were surveyed both in person and electronically. The questions asked in the survey were yes/no questions and were directly related with domestic helpers. The first two questions intended to reveal the employability rate of domestic helpers. Out of the hundred people, eighty eight responded in affirmative when asked whether they have a domestic helper or not, and seventy four believed that domestic helpers are a necessity in today's era. This accentuates that the employability chances for individuals from underprivileged sections are high in this sector.

The remaining three questions were asked to find the efficacy of English language in the profession of domestic helpers. The first of these questions was whether the participants will be more impressed and respectful towards their domestic helpers if domestic helpers start conversing in English. The participants' response was captivating as ninety three of them replied in positive. In the next question, ninety seven of the people agreed when asked whether domestic helpers would be more useful to them if domestic helpers acquire basic competence of English. The last question sought to detect the income growth of domestic helpers. When

asked whether they would be willing to pay more to English competent and decorous domestic helpers, eighty seven consented. These results substantiate the fact that in order to strengthen the employability and sustainability of domestic helpers, it is vital to equip them with basic competence of English language. This can be done by running short-time and affordable vocational training programmes that lay special emphasis on English for household purposes and soft skills.

ESP for helpers

A good ESP course and syllabus can be designed for domestic helpers keeping in mind the following suggestions:

- **Nature-** The course can be designed using the communicative approach, and should focus on functional aspects of language rather than form. It can be skill-centred.
- **Language Skills-** Being a receptive skill, acquisition of reading skills can be realised easily. Hence, reading skills can be given utmost priority followed by speaking skill. The course can include only the basics of listening skills, and can even avoid the inclusion of writing skills.
- **Grammar-** The course ought to be error-tolerant with only practical emphasis on grammar.
- **Lexis-** From the nine parts of speech, the course should impart knowledge of necessary nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. Teaching interjections and articles can be avoided at the beginning. Besides the fundamental vocabulary, the course should include a list of lexical items which are pertinent in household. For instance:

- *Nouns* - A list of ingredients that are common in Indian dishes and some well-liked foreign dishes.
- A list of articles, tools, appliances and furniture found in every household. For e.g. *plier, power point, curtain etc.*
- *Verbs* - A list of action words that are generally performed in household. For e.g. *wipe, clean, dust, mop, dry, polish, iron, wash, arrange etc.*

- A list of action words that are common in kitchen and are also found on the instructions. For e.g. *sieve, grate, scramble, mix* etc.
- **Syntax-** Although by and large, the course can be process-oriented, some essential and practical linguistic products can be included in the course.
 - *Warnings-* In order to avoid repercussions, the learners can be made familiar with some common warnings/instructions beforehand. For e.g. “Handle with care,” “Poisonous if swallowed,” “Do not iron imprint” etc.
 - *Polite questions and polite requests-* The learners can also be made to learn some polite utterances which can help them in impressing their employers right from the beginning. For e.g. “Would you like to have...?” “Did you call me ma’am?” “Please have your...”

The length and depth of these ESP programmes can vary according to the needs and goals of the learners. At the intermediate and advanced level, the learners can be subjected to high-level practical learning. For instance, they can be given a listening practice using the instructional videos (in intelligible Indian English accent) from the internet of various recipes.

Scope and Advantages of ESP for Domestic Helpers

With the advancement throughout the globe, the investors have already set their feet in the market of domestic helpers. After the success of Singaporean online portals like *Islandmaids.com*, *bestmaid.com* and *housemaid.com*, India has also started witnessing online marketing of domestic servants in websites like *maidinindia.co*, *greataupair.com* and *bookmybai.com*. This hints at the rising employability and competition for domestic helpers, which can be tackled well if ESP is amalgamated in the same profession.

There are several advantages in equipping domestic helpers with English competency. Some of the exceptional ones are listed below.

- **Income Increment-** It is certain from the survey above that English competence of domestic helpers is directly proportional to their income. In fact, English competence enlarges the parameter of employability as well as income to a noticeable extent. The

same has been identified by Lahiri who, regarding the expats living in New Delhi, points out that “many expats are willing to pay a premium for proficiency in English, familiarity with Western food, and the ability to manage other staff.”

- **International Job Prospects-** Bagchi and Choksi’s article “Maids in Mahnattan” overtly highlights the fact that the domestic servants with considerable English competence have a demand in the Indian fraternity visiting /living abroad. Karan Anand, head, relationships, Cox and Kings Ltd. is cited by Bagchi and Choksi saying, “Well-to-do professionals or those belonging to large business families usually take nannies along if they travel with their children.” The absence of English competence is also foregrounded in the same article where a Thomas Cook spokesperson is found saying, “Often they [nannies] are coached with respect to clothing and general carriage, but not for language.”
- **Independent Work-** As they would be able to perceive most of the instructions, English competence can make domestic helpers noticeably independent in doing the household.
- **Subconscious Learning-** Language is better acquired than learnt. Once the domestic helpers will start working using the language they have learnt in their programme, their communicative competence will keep on increasing subconsciously.

As a matter of fact, many young underprivileged individuals who tend to become domestic helpers already have primary knowledge of English. This is because of the compulsory and free schooling that they had received before dropping out due to various reasons. This makes the task for ESP teachers easier to some extent.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that English being a global language increases the chances of better employability. This fact has been well recognised by the fortunate sections of society. In order to bring about inclusive growth, it is now time to upgrade those who have been living a destitute life over the years by helping them realise the very fact. The mean of the responses in the aforementioned survey suggests that around eighty seven percent of well-to-do Indians would be pleased to have English competence in their domestic helpers. The results substantiate the fact that the income as well as the standard of domestic helpers would improve if they are subjected to a short-term vocational training with special emphasis on teaching ESP.

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