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Teaching English to First Generation Learners

Abstract

Communication is essential nowadays. Language is the dress of thought. It acts as a vital a phenomenon for mutual understanding. English language acts as an instrument for communication. There are many innovative methods and techniques emerging day by day to teach it. Though we have various methodologies, it seems quit challenging task for teacher to teach English to the First Generation Learners. This paper covers some of the stumbling blocks of the first generation learners in learning English and suggests methodologists to learn it to improve their communicative skills in English.

I. Introduction

The term ‘first generation learners’ (FGL) here refers to the students who are the first one in their entire generation to go to school and receive an education or whose parents have attended the formal education system up till primary level of schooling. These children face a multitude of academic, psychological, socio-economic and cultural challenges. This research project investigates the academic challenges faced by first generation learners in terms of classroom challenges related to course content, method of teaching, regular attendance, assessment and participation in co-curricular activities. It also looks at how parental support affects these transactions. For this study, first generation learners are considered as those

children whose parents have either no education or dropped out after 8th grade. The terrain demands a lot of physical effort and most of the students walk a long distance every day to reach school. Poor infrastructure facilities leave very few opportunities for employment, typically, agriculture, joining the military or manual work. Families of first generation learners largely fall into these categories. Their economic level is quite low in terms of disposable income.

II. Literature Review

First generation learners are ‘disadvantaged learners’ who are disadvantaged from an educational and economic point of view. They are considered to be linguistically deficient, academically unsuccessful and socially and economically backward². Most of these learners are children of agricultural laborers, bonded laborers, and civic-sanitation workers with no educational background. These learners do not have any parental support as their parents are illiterate or have received basic education only up till 8th standard. Very often parents take their children to work in agricultural field so that they can contribute towards the family’s income. As a result, many of these learners remain under-achievers, school dropouts and failures in academics which is directly related to the opportunities they get later in their lives. Due to their poor academic backgrounds, first generation learners are often labeled as ‘dull’ or ‘backward’ and this may create similar identities in such students once they accept their roles. In literature, first generation learners are the first one in their entire generation to go to school and to receive education. Due to their nature they have been termed as ‘special need children’, who are low on academic achievement, have characteristics such as inferiority complex, lack of initiative, maladjustment and an underdeveloped personality (Ghosh, 2014).

The factors identified that affect their academic behaviors are numerous and complex like working outside school in income generating activities (majorly due to their low economic status), lack of personal and family knowledge regarding education to direct or motivate them. Education is seldom seen as a ticket to economic and thus social stability as class is one of the major factors which intersects with academic behavior and choices (Snell, 2008).

Ghosh states that first generation learners may find themselves “on the margins of two cultures” and have to often renegotiate relationship at school and at home to manage the tension between the two. The teachers have both implicit and explicit beliefs on their roles with regard to FGL. Questions like- ‘Why must we have these children (who do not have any use of education in their lives as they are tend to fill into their parents shoes) in school? ‘question the basic existing social norms (Jha & Dhir, 2002). Statements like this call for understanding the context within which children, their parents and communities live which are often intertwined with caste and religious identities. Prior research has substantiated that among the very poor and girl children the importance of education falls even lower as family survival goes further down (Ramachandran & Saihjee, 2002).

Based on the available studies conducted around the challenge faced by the first generation learners in India, these challenges can be categorized in four major parts:

- i. Socio-economic and cultural,
- ii. Educational environment at home,
- iii. Academic challenges inside classroom and
- iv. Psychological or non-academic challenges.

Apart from these major categories, some other set of challenges like parental challenges in terms of dealing with the school as an institution are quite important as there is greater commitment towards education among parents who see the linkage of education with

power all around them. Findings suggest that it is parental commitment to schooling which keeps children in the classroom, even at the cost of additional debts and hardships (Jha & Dhir, 2002). Parents of first generation learners often find the school environment completely alien to them and this poses a big hurdle for them to interact with the school on a regular basis. The attitude of the school towards these parents can further make it difficult for them to approach school. Parents' commitment thus, emerges largely as a cultural force influenced sometimes by political movements or by long term visions, or by hopes of future employment (Madan, 2005).

III. Significance of This Research

The context of this research has significance for illiterate parents and their children who, as the literature suggests, suffer from various forms of academic and non-academic challenges. Intention is to help school prepare itself to address these challenges effectively in order to support first generation learners continue their education. Our study attempts to find the academic challenges specific to classroom which the school may incorporate to accommodate first generation learners in its daily classroom transactions. We believe such findings would be useful to school and also to first generation learners and their parents in feeling more inclusive.

IV. Analysis

An analysis for this study is categorized into three majorparts;

- A. Parental support,
- B. Teacher intervention,
- C. Challenges faced by first generation learners

A. Parental Support

Parents' social background in both the school setups is homogenous in nature as they reside in the same community and are employed in similar occupations. However, their economic background may vary slightly as families whose children are admitted into the NGO-run school have to pay fees (it offers scholarships to students belonging to low income groups and most of the FGLs are included in this category) while those whose children are admitted in government school get free education. For most of the families sending their children to government school, there is an acknowledgement that without financial support, education is inaccessible. Raman (name changed), a parent responded that 'the help by the government like providing free books, school dress etc. has enabled them to send their child to school which earlier was unaffordable.' In case of NGO-run school, there are two FGL families in the given sample size whose scholarships have been revoked and now plan to move their children to government school the coming academic year, one of them said that 'going to school is important even if they don't study anything as sitting at home and doing nothing is worse.' It can be safely concluded that majorly FGLs come from a low economic background and are dependent on outside sources to gain access to education.

Another indicator suggesting the same is the availability of 'pocket-money' with children to spend on either stationery or food items. 93% of the students from the NGO-run school agreed to have access to pocket money as compared to 47% from the government school. Such economic factor may help students in supporting their education and also act as an incentive which might motivate them to attend school. Further, 73% of the NGO-run school respondents have access to books other than course related, suggesting that families with better economic condition facilitate their children's education through investing in such resources. Interestingly, the same percentage of respondents (73%) from government school does not have access to such resources at home. This may be due to the use of these materials

in NGO-run school and the emphasis on co-curricular activities that has transcended itself into the home environment of the child and vice-versa can be applied to the government school. However, this does not seem to have an impact on students' educational aspirations, as 40% government school children aspired to complete college in contrast with 33.34% from the NGO-run school.

Academic support from parents is limited due to their own lack of education or lack of time to spend with their children. With the exception of one family, it is the father who has received more education than the mother, however mothers interact more with the school system (60%). The general understanding is that the father goes off to work and so the mother is the only one available. Even when it comes to encouraging the child to study, it is the mother who makes the child sit in her presence to make sure the child studies uninterrupted for some time. Even though they cannot provide any academic help, this act itself implies that education is considered important and as something valuable which may motivate the child to study. Parents who had received some education expressed that their knowledge has become outdated now, referring to the new body of knowledge or textbooks that are available to children at present. Ramah (name changed) said that 'the earlier Math is of no use for these kids (like learning tables of $1/2$ and $1/4$).' He is therefore unable to follow up with their education. Also, as the child moves towards higher grades, parents find it difficult to provide support for them academically and financially as compared to primary level. Manahan (name changed), who sends his children to government school stated that 'the scholarship received for his younger daughter's education is spent on the elder one (who has none) as the school provides everything till 8th class and so that extra money can be used on higher education (above 8th class)'. English stands out as an alien subject for all parents interviewed in this study, which combined with poor teaching resources reflects in students

‘performance as well. 80% of all the students interviewed find English as the most difficult subject.

Level of parental support is to a large extent similar in both the school set-ups. Parental support is a combination of variables like monetary support, frequency of school visits, motivating the child to study, following up on school work and providing support in homework. With regard to reacting on their child’s poor performance, 53% of NGO School parents resort to scolding while government school parents are divided on the matter- 33% motivate the child to work harder while the other 33% are indifferent towards their child’s performance. Parental motivation to work harder in next exams was observed to be for 13% of the first generation learners in NGO-run school which is quite lesser than that of government school students(33%)(refer figure 3). The motivating response by the parents of the government school could be to facilitate the gap generated by the indifferent response of government school teachers towards student’s poor performance.

The present literature suggested that FGLs have high dropout rates as the parents see no use of education and put them to work at an early age so as to contribute towards the family’s income. But findings of this research suggest the complete opposite. Education is seen by parents as a means to bettering their present living conditions and a way out of poverty. Ramadi, mother of a student in ABS explains that ‘the child is encouraged to study to better her own living conditions in the future.’ The parents are ensuring their children’s education as they themselves could not get educated. 42.1% of parents explicitly stated that they saw education as a ‘way out of poverty’. As a form of encouragement, parents tell their children that they work hard to support their education, and so children should consider and work hard in their studies for various reasons like better standard of living, moving to the city etc. All parents showed willingness to continue their children’s education as per their wishes and their academic performance but felt that they could not force children to study.

Some are also filled with this ‘dedication’ to support their children’s education as they themselves could not study. Parents also try to provide as much non-academic support as they can to their children so that they can study uninterruptedly. Parents also support their child’s education by sending their children regularly to school and even avoid social commitments if need be. Kamala encourages her child to study by sending her to school regularly, even during festivals-‘If we have to go somewhere we postpone our plans for the weekend.’ There is therefore emphasis on studying regularly. A few of them also said that they keep their children out of the household chores so that they can study. Parents persist to provide non-academic support as much as they can. In terms of active engagement with school, the results show differences in parental visit to school between both the school setups. 80% of the NGO school students indicated that their parents visit school twice or more than twice a year while 46.67% indicated the same frequency in govt. schools.

B. Teacher Intervention

Teachers of both the schools agreed to have felt a difference between first generation learners and non-first generation learners as ‘they are not so open as compared with other kids’. Their homework mostly remains incomplete. A teacher expressed that as these children move to higher classes their participation in co-curricular activities decreases. Moreover, (by now) ‘they have accepted they cannot study’. They also learn reading very late (when they reach class 4). Teachers also felt a need to pay more attention and spend more time on these students. Implementation of the same, however, was observed to be different in NGO-run school and the government school. Teachers of NGO-run school are able to provide extra support to the first generation learners through remedial classes as well as in-class assistance.

According to the teachers, due to lack of parental support at home, FGLs have troubles in completing their homework. Government school teachers blamed the ‘no-

detention' policy for the poor performance of FGLs as now the children have no fear of lagging behind and therefore do not take studies seriously. Interaction with peers and teachers is inclusive in nature unlike what the literature review suggested that there is an exclusion of FGLs and school is an alien entity but apart from academics FGLs don't seem to face any problems.

“A student has to study on his/her own. It doesn't matter to be a first generation learner if one is motivated and works hard. The eldest sibling has more responsibility in such situation and one has to support his/her younger siblings in their education as well.”

– A first generation learner turned teacher.

Teacher interaction with parents of first generation learners was found to be satisfactory by parents of both the schools. The purpose behind these visits in the NGO-run school is Parent-Teacher Meetings (held twice a year to hand over the term results). While in Government schools the majority (55.5%) visit the school for PTMs, a sizeable number (44.4%) visit the school only to receive books, uniform etc. While the frequency of visits is not high, some parents share a healthy relationship with the teachers as they are from the same community; the familiarity helps them talk to the teacher outside the formal school setting. A parent from the NGO School responded 'interaction is helpful and friendly as they are part of the community and share a deep understanding'. Even in the government school, one teacher was termed as 'gaonkibeti' (daughter of the village) as she used to live in their village before getting married. Parents perceived teachers to be making best of their efforts and none expressed any feeling of exclusion by the teachers towards them or their children. Raja (name changed) whose child studies in the NGO school and has difficulty in English and Math feels that his children are 'buddhu' (a fool), so there is no point in making them sit and study. Here the child is labeled by the parent rather than teachers or peers as (Ghosh, 2014) had suggested in his study. Even the government school parents hold the same view and

feel that the teachers are doing the best they can as they have other administrative duties and giving individual attention to every child is not possible. This offers a contradiction with the literature reviewed which suggested teachers forming exclusive behavior towards first generation learners and their families.

Teacher intervention falls in the medium category for the NGO-run school; while in the government school the numbers are close in medium and low range. Teacher intervention is a combination of variables like teacher making a student sit in the first row so as to pay attention to her, level of teacher interaction within the classroom, and level of teacher concern regarding the child's performance.

The reaction on students' poor performance is worrisome in the government school as 67% of the FGLs responded that teachers show indifference towards the matter while 47% of NGOFGLs responded that their school teachers resort to scolding (refer figure 3). The student teacher interaction is high in the NGO school- 53% as compared to government school- 40%. NGO school teachers show frequent concern towards FGLs learning levels (67%), than government school teachers (53%). As a result of which students feel more confident in asking questions in the NGO School (53%) than government school students (40%).

C. Challenges faced by first generation learners

The challenges faced by the respondents have been operationalized in terms of student confidence. Other factors attributing towards the challenges faced by first generation learners are related to the distance to the school, any form of exclusion by peers or teachers, course content, method of teaching, assessment and participation in co-curricular activities. Interaction with peers and teachers is normal unlike what the literature review suggested that there is an exclusion of FGLs and school is an alien entity but apart from academics FGLs don't seem to face any problems. In fact the NGO school teachers take remedial classes for

these children, specifically English. The teachers pointed out that these students' homework mostly remains incomplete suggesting the possible challenges one might face to do so.

Government school is more accessible in terms of distance as the average time taken is 28mins as compared to 41mins for the NGO school. Government school being present in every village is closer to students' homes. As mentioned earlier under parental support, availability of stationery and money to spend varied for first generation learners in both the contexts. Interestingly, such motivation does not seem to have any impact on their educational aspirations.

English as a subject is a major challenge for first generation learners and 70% of all the learners find comprehension and reading as the difficult areas. Lack of parental support as well as schools' own limitation in teaching English would further contribute to the difficulty of the subject itself. Notion of exams were observed to be fearsome among many first generation learners. In present times, when students cannot be detained in the same grade, exams are still seen important in order to move to next grade by 47% of the respondents representing both the schools. 27% of the students from NGO-run school feel scared of exams while 47% from government said they feel the same. A possible reason for the same could be that parents see marks as a key indicator of their child's academic performance in school. For some students, further education is directly connected to their grades forming an anxiety towards examinations. Parents of the government school going students are motivating their children to work harder next time, probably, as to facilitate the gap generated by indifference of government teachers.

V. Conclusion

The challenges faced by first generation learners in both the contexts are to an extent similar which can be attributed to their similar socio-cultural backgrounds. As an educational

institution the NGO-run school seems to have marginally higher teacher intervention to address the concerns of such students. Numerous co-curricular activities are introduced to the NGO school children, thereby providing them more exploration opportunities for all-round development. This is lacking in government schools which concentrate only on academics and exposure to co-curricular activities is minimal (one sports event in the entire academic year).

Combining the impact of factors like teacher intervention and parental support on student confidence in terms of the challenges faced by them, it is observed that the challenges faced by first generation learners at the NGO-run school have somewhat lesser degree of impact than the challenges faced by their counterparts at the government school.

This creates an imbalance which could be attributed by lack of parental support. This may be due to parental motivation and student aspirations which are higher for government schoolchildren. In both the cases the microsystem of the child is not in sync which in turn affects her development and learning levels.

It emerged during the study that elder siblings play a crucial role in supporting education of younger ones. In many cases, elder siblings are observed to help the respondents in their studies. In our sample size all the FGLs who have elder siblings responded that they receive help from them in homework and their notebooks are checked by them. Also, the responsibility of household work lies solely on their shoulders and the younger siblings are relieved from them. These dynamics could be explored through further research in future and study how lack of parental support in academics can be overcome by educating the eldest child in the family. None of the literature reviewed for this study had highlighted this factor.

Exam marks being the only form of indicator for parents to follow up on their child's performance and thus in deciding a child's further education, it becomes important that results are actually reflecting child's knowledge. A comprehensive and continuous

evaluation(CCE) approach to assess students could work towards it and also help in reducing child's anxiety towards examinations. This contributes as a major factor in deciding a child's further education. Amaya (name changed), who sends her children to government school explain- 'the elder child entered schooling at a later age and is unable to cope-up with the studies...the age of learning has went by and so she will only study till 8th class as education is of nouse to her. However she (pointing towards the younger child) can study as much as she wants.' Many parents expressed this view that as far as their child is doing well in studies they will continue their education. Therefore, it is important for the child to perform well in school so as to reduce the dropout rates.

To conclude, "Those who are first generation learners today should be facilitated with proper educational opportunity. But as and when they get education and employment, their next generation no longer remains first generation learners".

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