

Language Teaching And Learning

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Learning a language and using it as an efficient tool in speech and writing is the first vital step in the education of children. And the foundation of proficiency in language is laid at school from the primary through the secondary stage. With English made a compulsory second language the task of teaching it side by side with the first language, Bangla, takes on a new dimension. Compulsory or optional, any subject, once it is part of a child's study programme, deserves equal attention from the learner as well as the teacher.

But the actual conditions are far different. Even compulsory subjects are not as seriously studied as they ought to be. This is borne out by the shoddy performance of individuals required to show skill in language, or originality of ideas. Analysts put it down to the fact that students at almost all stages of learning have come to depend on cramming or on the help rendered by private tutors providing them with readymade answers.

The worst effect of this now pretty ubiquitous habit is mostly perceived in language subjects, whether it is the mother tongue or the other tongue, (English). Which shows that reforms or executive decisions, particularly where intellectual abilities are concerned, will require that these be backed by work done in the class room matched by that done at home both by the teacher and the student.

Rigours of class room exercises or the student concern about the way a teacher would react to his performance, particularly in written work (class or home), have long gone with the dedicated old teacher and the old habit. Gone is also the moral and official commitment of the teacher to the job of grooming the children put in his charge as well as the seriousness with which a student felt answerable to his teacher for not performing well.

That these, in principle and practice, are receding can however be no argument that the slide should not be stopped by effective executive steps and proficiency tests so planned as to clearly mark the grades made by the students. The reason for things to dip now so abysmally is that, while reforms are in the air or in force, or orders are given by the official authorities, compliance with them is seldom a matter of serious concern to anybody. This holds true not only for education. The same absence of accountability is seen almost everywhere. Laws, orders and directives are issued sometime in pretty strong language, but the back-up step based on the monitoring of the process of compliance is scarcely there.

To return to language-teaching is to return to (1) the classrooms and to investigate how scrupulously drills in written language have been carried out. A precisely prepared monthly statement showing the progress in a given language, Bangla or English, is among the ways to bring both sides into line.

Education reformists anxious to make education more purposive have started thinking along such line. In fact, there is nothing new about it. What is new is that we have scrapped practically everything (discipline, teacher accountability, student obligation etc) that made education of children so efficient, say, in the twenties and thirties.

If all this relates more to the ethical side of teaching the functional part needs also looking into. There is too big a load a child has to bear now of too many subjects from class III on to class VI, and thenceforth through the secondary stage. To bring about more concentration on language-learning subjects like social studies starting from class III ought to go.

Islamiat, to be effective, can be taught more by instilling verbally into young minds the fundamentals of Islam instead of requiring them to undergo more toilsome studies as at present. The latter would come naturally and easily in a child's advanced years with the mind more trained to receive an essentially philosophic subject like religion. The same holds true for arithmetic which should cease to be the brain teaser it is now.

Instead, give him a good grounding in language, preferably in more than one language, by cutting his load drastically. The written word is the linchpin of civilization. It marks the climactic phase of the process of articulation following those of a onomatopoeia oratory, poetry. It is the litmus test of the quality of a nation.