

The Problems of English Teaching and Learning in Mizoram

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problems of English Language Teaching and Learning in Mizoram, a state in India's North-Eastern region. Since the State is evolving to be a monolingual state, more and more people tend to use only the local language, although skill in English language use is very highly valued by the people. Problems faced by both the teachers and the students are listed. Deficiencies in the syllabus as well as the textbooks are also pointed out. Some methods to improve the skills of both the teachers and students are suggested.

Key words: English language teaching and learning, Mizoram schools, problems faced by students and teachers.

1. Introduction

In order to understand the conditions and problems of teaching-learning English in Mizoram, it is important to delve into the background of Mizoram - its geographical location, the origin of the people (Mizo), the languages of the people, and the various cultures and customs practised by the people. How and when English Language Teaching (ELT) was started in Mizoram or how English is perceived, studied, seen and appreciated in Mizoram is an interesting question. Its remoteness and location also create problems for the learners.

2. Geographical Location

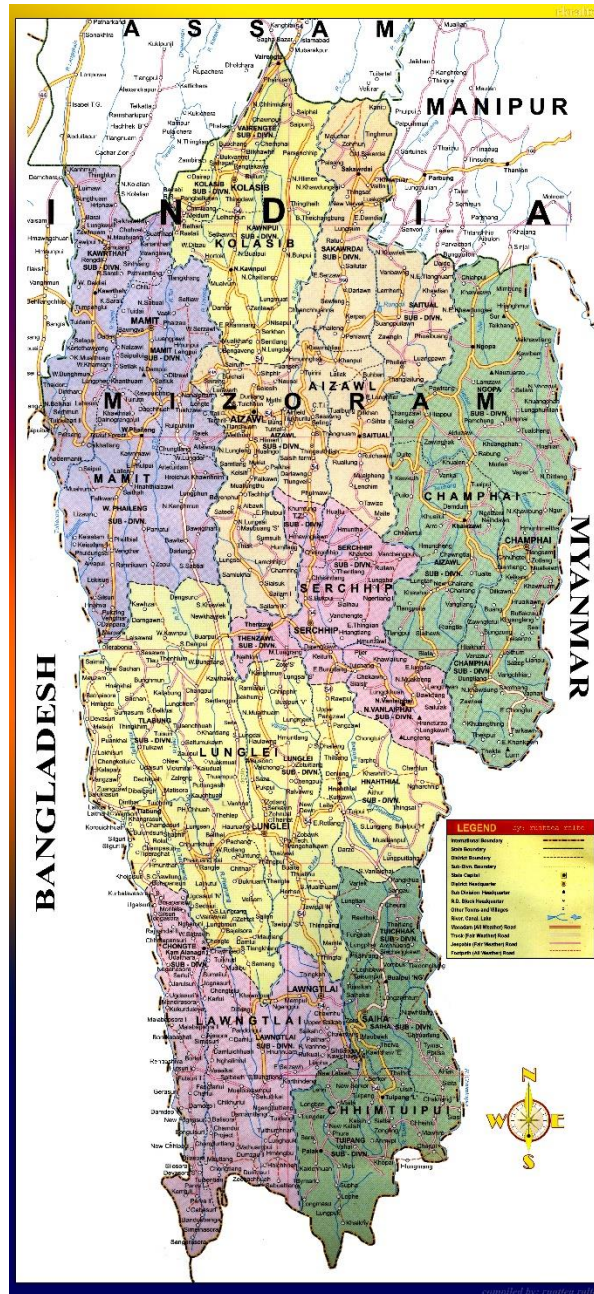


Figure 1 : Map of Mizoram

Mizoram is a mountainous region which became the 23rd State of the Indian Union in February, 1987. Formerly, it was known as, ‘the Lushai Hills’ district of Assam until it became a Union Territory in 1972. It lies in the southern most corner of North-East India and is the abode of the Mizos. Area wise, it ranks 18th in the Indian Territory, with 21,081 sq.km. The length of the geographical area of the State, stretching north to south is 277 km, while from east to west is 121 km. It shares its boundaries with the three States of Indian Union – Assam, Tripura and Manipur, which extend over 95 km. It has a total of 630 miles (722km.) international boundary with Burma and Bangladesh. It is bounded on the east by the Chin Hills of Burma, on the south by the Arakan Hill Tracts of Burma; on the west by the

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Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and Tripura State of India; on the north by the Cachar district of Assam and the Manipur State. Mizoram is divided into eight districts, namely, Aizawl, Lunglei, Champhai, Mamit, Kolasib, Serchhip, Saiha and Lawngtlai. Three districts, viz. Hnahthial, Khawzawl and Saitual, have been added in the last part of 2008 making the total number to eleven. (*Dr.Lal Luangliana Khiangte: 2013*)

3. The Mizo Language

The Mizos are an important hill tribe of the Indian sub-continent. Linguistically, they speak a Mizo language and belong to the Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman family. According to their mythology, the Mizos had a script written on animal skin, which was eaten up by a stray dog, leaving the Mizos without a script. The Christian Missionaries compiled what is now referred to as the Mizo alphabet, using the Roman Script in 1894 which resulted in the rapid development of Mizo literature.

Although, Mizoram is the home to several other Kuki-Chin languages such as Hmar, Lakher, Pawi, Ralte, etc., Mizo remains as the *lingua franca* throughout the state. Speakers of other Kuki-Chin languages have either forgotten or given up their languages in favour of Mizo and its users are hence bound together by this very common language.

4. Impact of Christianity

One of the most striking features of the impact of Christianity on the social life is the introduction of modern, western education, which in turn, is supposed to have had a profound effect on the life style and consumption pattern. The literacy level provides an instant indicator of the impact of Christianity. In 1981, while Arunachal Pradesh had 4.28% Christians, the percentage of literacy was only 20.79 in that state. In contrast Mizoram with over 88% Christian tribals had 59.88% literacy. According to 1991 census, the literacy rate in Mizoram is 81.23 where male shares 84.06% and females 78.09%/ In literacy, Mizoram leads the highest number of male and female literates in North-East India where per capita budgeted expenditure on education is 400.81, the highest in North-East Region. Even though Mizoram is a remote area and economically backward, it is going through a process of rapid development which necessitates interaction through medium of English as well as teaching-learning English within the state. (*Dr.C.Sangluaii :2010*)

5. The Scenario of English Teaching in Mizoram

As English is an international language today, the teaching and learning of it is made compulsory even in a remote area like Mizoram.

The primary aim and objective of English language teaching in Mizoram is to be able to produce learners who can use English to accelerate the process of national development. As English is an official language and the main medium of instruction in all the institutions, and most of the scientific and technical information is exchanged through the medium of English, we have to prepare the learners to perform different tasks and equip them to communicate effectively through English. The objective of English teaching in Mizoram is not simply to make the learners learn the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, but to enable them to play their communicative roles effectively.

6. Problems in the Teaching and Learning of English in Mizoram in the Present Day Situation

At present, various problems arise in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Mizoram. The ELT situation in Mizoram is in a state of flux and confusion though there is a tremendous increase in the desire and demand for learning English and corresponding increase in the number of English medium schools. At present, sending children to a good English medium school outside Mizoram is a status symbol in Mizo society. Knowing English or speaking correct English has become synonymous with being educated. If one speaks correct English, he is highly esteemed and valued by the Mizo people. Even though English is taught right from the elementary stage up to University level, the communicative ability or the proficiency level is still very poor.

The various problems in the teaching and learning of English in Mizoram may be listed as under:

i) Lack of Exposure

Lack of exposure to the use of English creates a learning problem for the learners. They do not have the chance to speak in English whether at schools or in their homes. As Mizos have a homogeneous unilingual society, the use of English in this situation is limited. The students could easily get whatever they want as long as they know Mizo. Mizoram is economically backward, but it is going through a process of rapid development. This

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necessitates interaction through the medium of English. But there is no opportunity for the learners to get exposed to the communicative forms of English. For most the English classroom is the only opportunity for exposure to the language. So, only limited opportunities are available for the use of English and to hear people speak in English. This results in the poor communication ability of the learners.

ii) Geographical Isolation

One of the greatest problems for the Mizo learners of English is the remoteness and the geographical location of Mizoram which does not help direct contact with native speakers of English. The remoteness of the State poses a peculiar problem because it does not generally attract good teachers of English from outside the State.

iii) Differences between the Two Languages

Another serious problem faced by the learners is the difference between the two languages (English and Mizo) which are entirely different from one another with regards to syntax, phonology, lexicon, morphology, etc. The difference between the two languages regarding the sentence structure often creates a learning problem for the learners.

iv) Mizo, a Tonal Language

Another problem faced by Mizos while learning English is that Mizo language is a tonal language where variations in tone and intonation pattern can change the meaning of words and utterances. In most Indian languages tone is an indicator of mood. Change of tone rarely alters the meaning of a word or utterance. In Mizo, however, there are four distinct tones namely, rising, falling, mid-low and high. There is hardly any relation between the mood and the tone. The change of tone indicates the change of meaning of the word. For example, in English, one may say the word “earth” in different tones – low or high, high-low or low-high, the meaning still remains the same. One equivalent of the English word “earth” is “lei” in Mizo with the use of a particular tone. With different tones “lei” can portray different meanings like “buy”, “tongue”, “lop-sided” and “bridge”. Thus tonal language employs variations in pitch to distinguish the meaning of otherwise identical words.

The Mizo language is basically monosyllabic, with each syllable having its own pitch, tone, length and special emphasis. So, it becomes especially difficult for the average Mizo

learners to acquire a good command of English. The Mizo language has rather limited vocabulary.

v) Problems Faced in the Learning of English Pronunciation

Another problem of Mizo learners begins with English phonology. The real sound or power of a letter of the English alphabet is not always the same as the name of the letter would indicate, and the real sound can only be learnt from a teacher. And sometime the teachers themselves are not trained in phonetics. This creates a problem in the learning process of the language. Students who hear the “strange sounds” of English at first will tend to perceive them as variants of the categories of sounds with which they are familiar in the first language. Again, even the sounds of English, which occur also in the students’ language, but with a different distribution, will again pose an additional problem. Many words are mispronounced because they are unaware of the phonetic symbols in words such as *bouquet*, *buffet*, *bury*, *alumni*, *arrears*, *debut*, *debris*, *indict*, etc.

vi) Problems Faced in Learning English Spelling System

Mizo learners face another problem in the English spelling system. The many peculiarities found in the English spelling system create confusion in the Mizo learners, because the spelling system is quite unlike the one followed in Mizo in which words are pronounced in a different way. The spelling conventions for the use of the Roman Script in Mizo are quite different from the spelling conventions in the use of the Roman Script in English. English spelling is not always a correct guide to the actual sounds the letters stand for. Silent letters are also a source of confusion to learners of English as a second language like in the words such as *psychology*, *receipt*, *debt*, *coup*, *psalm*, *receipt*. etc.

vii) Syllabus Structure

It is true that the current state of English Language Teaching in India, in general, and in Mizoram, in particular, is, by and large, unrelated to the essentials of a second language teaching situation. Our teaching efforts are not generally aimed at teaching the use of English language but the knowledge of the English language system. The inadequate syllabuses, unsuitable textbooks and inappropriate teaching methods are some of the major factors responsible for the deterioration of education in Mizoram.

Looking at the syllabus structure one can see that it gives little scope for the enhancement of communicative ability of the students. It is mostly based on poetry, grammar and literature. One can easily learn by heart the lessons without much improvement in the communication skills. So, the syllabus structure is not practical enough for the students to use it in real life situations.

viii) Translation Method

Another problem in the teaching of English language is the extensive use of the translation method. The teacher translates the lesson or the given passage into Mizo. Though it may help the learners to understand the content of the text, yet it bars them from learning the language. The main purpose of teaching the language is kept aside and the teaching of content and the theme is given importance.

Most English teachers in Mizoram adopt translation or traditional method of teaching, but the syntax of English is quite different from the syntax of Mizo. Whereas the word order of English is subject, verb, object (SVO), the word order of Mizo language is subject, object, verb (SOV). What can be done in translation of any two languages into each other, in general, is to give more or less equivalent meanings. Thus, translation method is not practical for all times since the word order of English and Mizo are different.

ix) Attitude towards English Language

English is learnt with awe and learners are very much afraid of making mistakes while speaking and writing English which creates a learning problem. They are scared of being laughed at and their friends making fun of them. So, this attitude of the learners hinders the learning process of the learners.

In Mizo society, only Mizo language is used as the medium of communication. Because of this, even among the students the use of English language is very much limited. If a student speaks in English, the other student may judge him/her whether his/her English is grammatically correct or not, or may laugh at him/her or make fun of their pronunciation, etc., because the student is speaking in English. In such a situation, everyone is afraid of speaking in English or making mistakes while speaking. The student feels hesitant to speak in English and this hinders the growth of the student's proficiency in the language. In order to

overcome such a problem, it is necessary to change the attitude of the students towards those who are willing to use English.

x) Sociocultural Setting

The Mizos live in a close-knit society where everyone is treated equally and the various organisations like YMA, KTP, TKP, etc., keep the bonds of the Mizo people stronger. Everyone gets a chance to prove his credibility in the society. But there is a little chance of using English as everyone knows Mizo. The chance of speaking English is very much limited as the people to converse with are not many in number. Moreover, some people have wrong attitude towards a person who speaks in English or Hindi as they think that such languages are not necessary within Mizoram. Thus this is another obstacle which creates problems in learning the language.

xi) Inappropriate Method of Teaching

In most schools and colleges in Mizoram, the students are taught English through the translation method which is not at all effective for improving the students' proficiency in the language. Most of the teachers are unaware of the objectives of language teaching: Language teaching is intended not simply to make the learners learn the language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing, but to enable the learners to play their communicative roles effectively.

Most of the teachers teach the prescribed books, imparting the knowledge of the content of textbooks but not all the skills of the language used in the textbooks. The teachers teach English as they teach other subjects such as Political Science, History, and Geography, etc. Most of the teachers are busy preparing notes for the students and preparing the students for examinations, having no time to impart the skills of the language. At the same time, students are also not given a chance to use English in the classroom. Naturally, the learners in an English classroom are passive learners who hardly contribute anything to the classroom teaching. They just keep silent even when simple questions are put to them. It is a fact that the even the case of Mizo learners of English in Aizawl, the capital of the Mizoram State is very similar to the conditions of teaching-learning English in the rural and interior parts of the country. In Mizoram, English is dear to the heart of the people who have religious and cultural affinities with the language and have assimilated some aspects of the native culture

inherent in it. Proficiency in the language of English is highly valued in the society. Yet, the proficiency achieved by learners of English continues to be very low.

xii) Lack of Practice

In Mizoram, as already mentioned, we have a largely homogeneous unilingual society, so that we can communicate with one another by using one language (Mizo language) throughout Mizoram, even though we have a number of dialects like Pawi, Kuki, Paihte, Hmar, Lakher, etc. Even as the smaller groups possess common cultural social and linguistic affinities, they pose no problem. As a result, we need not speak English or Hindi in order to communicate with each other, as the Mizo language is the main medium of communication within the state of Mizoram, and because of this, exposure to the use of English is very limited for the learners. Therefore, lack of practice is one of the main causes of the weakness of the learners in spoken English. Students in Mizoram hardly speak in English even inside the classroom or the school compound. Even at the college level, the students are unable to express themselves in English.

xiii) Lack of Trained Teachers

The problem here, again, is lack of adequate training on the part of the teachers to handle language classes effectively. In Mizoram, trained teachers with ELT background are rarely available. Even training through Refresher courses or Orientation courses does not help the teaching-learning situation much as there is little facility for the teachers in the field for in-service training, particularly at the college level. Although, a lot of research has been done on methods, approaches and techniques for teaching English in our country and abroad, the teachers in Mizoram are largely not familiar with them, and their knowledge of the findings of research on methods, approaches and techniques cannot be put into use in practice. There is an SCERT and a District Centre of EFLU in Mizoram, and their research and training programmes are directed towards school teachers. However, such programmes have not yet impacted the teachers' handling language classes effectively.

xiv) Lack of Innovation

Another problem faced by the students in the learning of English in Mizoram is that the teachers lack innovation. They teach English like any other subject. They do not give extra effort for the students to enhance their communicative ability, to be able to use in real

life situations. This is another obstacle which hinders the growth and use of English skills among the students in Mizoram.

xv) Lack of Interest

Another problem in the learning of English in Mizoram is that students concentrate only on obtaining passing marks in their examinations. They do not care for learning the language as a tool of communication. Teachers and the taught both look at this subject as an unavoidable hurdle and try their level best to cross this hurdle by getting the pass marks.

xvi) Outdated Teaching Methodology

The teaching methodology applied for teaching English in Mizoram is rather outdated. The same methodology which has been used fifty years ago is still being applied in the present day. The only motive of the teachers is that they finish their syllabus responsibilities and that the students do well in the exams. The communication skills of the students, their creativity, etc., are not given any importance. The teaching methodology is very much exam-oriented in the sense that teachers only want their students to do well in the exam, whether the students really know the subject or not.

xvii) Teacher-centred Classes vs. Learner-centred Classes

Another problem in the teaching-learning of English language in Mizoram is that teacher does everything. There is little scope for the students to participate in the classroom to enhance their communication skills. The teacher teaches the students, gives them notes to learn by heart and moves on to the next chapter. The whole class looks up to the teacher for everything and thus they are spoon-fed which only limits their understanding and use of the language.

xviii) Crowded classes

Another problem is that the size of the classes in Mizoram is considerably large and thus the students' participation in the class work is quite impossible. The ratio of students in relation to teachers is not proportional. This is one of the reasons why individual attention to the students is not possible. It should be recognised that the practical work in the teaching of English demands that the number of students in the class be limited.

xix) Learning Methods

Another problem in the teaching of English in Mizoram is the inability of teachers to understand the difference between teaching of literature and teaching of language skills. The teachers should be aware that the study of a language is not an end in itself. It is a means to develop one's power of expression and comprehension. This can be achieved by mastering stylistic elements of the language.

xx) Question-setting Pattern

One of the factors responsible for the deterioration of educational achievement in general in Mizoram is the pattern of question setting. It is easy to predict what questions would be asked and from what sections of the textbooks in examinations. The students highly rely on the *bazaar* notes which are based on the compilation of the question papers asked for a number of preceding years in State Board examinations. The students simply have to memorize the answers for these "important" questions. The teachers also teach only those aspects which are important for the examination. Thus, the whole leaning process is very much exam-oriented and there is little scope for language development.

xxi) Common Errors in English

The common errors which the Mizo students commit in their speech and writing present another set of problems in English language teaching and learning. Errors been used over and over again and thus it becomes very difficult to overcome these errors. Most of the mistakes are made unknowingly, since these mistakes become habitual; we keep making the same mistake even without realizing that these are errors. If we study this problem in a scientific manner to know what the actual cause behind making the mistakes is, we would be able to avoid these errors.

xxii) Family Background

Last but not the least, the factor which poses as a big problem in the learning of English in Mizoram, is the family background of the students. The parents of the taught have little knowledge of the English language and thus are not in a position to help them in acquiring the language. Whatever is learnt in school is not followed up at home due to the fact that the parents do not understand the language. They do not give importance to the

learning process of the language and hence they do not motivate the students in learning the language.

Conclusion

In a remote area like Mizoram, where exposure to the use of English is limited, the curriculum planners and course designers have to take into account the real situation that exists in the classroom. The most important consideration in designing the course is the identification of the students' specific needs in English.

An analysing of the existing situation in Mizoram helped us to arrive at the following conclusions about the needs of the learners. It is a fact that there is little scope or opportunity for using English in social interaction, since the common tongue of Mizoram is the predominant medium of expression. English is essentially considered as a means of getting better jobs and pursuing higher education. In other words English, is required for 'on-the-job' situation. But this requirement is focused upon getting good marks in the examination, and not on acquiring better language skills in English.

It is therefore suggested that the students in Mizoram should be taught the specific skills of communication. The courses should be designed in order to make students use the rules of the language in real-life situation and consequently to enable them to deal with any kind of communicative situation in future.

The four most visible and tangible factors involved in classroom learning are the learner, the teacher, the book and the physical surroundings. While designing a course a designer should take into account these four factors in order to achieve the desirable goal which is to enable the students to communicate in English fluently and effectively.

The primary aim of the courses should be to ensure a move from the exercise level of language in the classroom to the experience level in the world outside. So, authentic language as it is being used has to be brought inside the classroom and the teachers should create a real world within the classroom for the students by bring in local and external speakers of English to interact with the students inside the classroom. Students have to be encouraged to go out and be in touch with the real world through educational tours. The textbook may, thus,

consists of editorials, advertisements, transcripts of real life dialogue and interviews, manuals, etc. This type of material can be used to stimulate real life situations.

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