

## Socio-cultural Sustainability through Study Material: English Language Teaching in India

### Problematyka zrównoważonego rozwoju społeczno-kulturowego w materiałach dydaktycznych: nauczanie języka angielskiego w Indiach

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#### **Abstract**

Teaching materials are the primary source of input in the language classroom. The potential of English language teaching (ELT) materials to preserve and transmit our culture, value, identity, and language make it significant for socio-cultural sustainability. The materials developed by the National Council of Education and Research Training (NCERT) are far and wide running study materials in primary and secondary schools in India. India exhibits a massive variety of cultures, customs, languages, and religious beliefs. The selection and development of apt materials is, therefore, a matter of serious deliberation. The centrally developed material, despite numerous benefits, often lacks in representing different groups of students, especially the backward and marginalized ones. The contents, in most cases, are representative of the mainstream. Therefore, the study suggests teachers developed supplementary materials to which learners from all the groups can relate. The researcher has taken the context of Jharkhand and illustrates self-developed supplementary materials prepared using contents from learners' social and cultural backgrounds. The article offers various suggestions on how to develop such materials that could bring socio-cultural equity in the classroom, making a significant contribution to social sustainability.

**Key words:** language teaching, material development, social sustainability, supplementary materials

#### **Streszczenie**

Materiały dydaktyczne są głównym źródłem informacji w klasie językowej. Potencjał materiałów do nauczania języka angielskiego (ELT) w ochronie i przekazywaniu naszej kultury, wartości, tożsamości i języka sprawia, że są one istotne z perspektywy zrównoważonego rozwoju społeczno-kulturowego. Materiały opracowane przez National Council of Education and Research Training (NCERT) są szeroko stosowanymi materiałami do nauki w szkołach podstawowych i średnich w Indiach. Indie wykazują ogromną różnorodność kultur, zwyczajów, języków i przekonań religijnych. Wybór i opracowanie odpowiednich materiałów jest zatem kwestią poważnej refleksji. W materiale opracowanym centralnie, mimo licznych korzyści, często brakuje reprezentacji różnych grup uczniów, zwłaszcza tych zacofanych i marginalizowanych. Treści w większości przypadków są reprezentatywne dla głównego nurtu. W związku warto zasugerować nauczycielom opracowanie materiałów uzupełniających, do których mogą odnieść się uczniowie ze wszystkich grup. W artykule przyjęto perspektywę Jharkhanda i przedstawiono własne materiały uzupełniające wykorzystujące treści pochodzące ze środowisk społecznych i kulturowych uczniów. Artykuł zawiera konkretne sugestie dotyczące opracowywania takich materiałów, które mogłyby zapewnić równość społeczno-kulturową w klasie, wnosząc znaczący wkład we wprowadzanie zrównoważonego rozwoju społecznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nauczanie języka, rozwój materiałów, zrównoważony rozwój społeczny, materiały uzupełniające

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of development has to do with the growth and well-being of a larger population that ensures freedom, social acceptance, and economic security to all. Sustainable development can be referred to as the equitable and balanced exploitation of resources that considers intergenerational needs. For such extensive and interminable growth, the interest of different groups of people must be taken care of within and beyond the existing generation. The established connection between the economic, environmental, and social components work together to produce sustainable development (UN General Assembly, 2005). Nonetheless, the literature lacks theoretical and empirical studies on social and cultural sustainability. Previous studies, as mentioned by the National Research Council (1999) in its report, mostly focus on economic development like employment, wealth, and consumption. However, it says recent literature has emphasized more on human development like life expectancy, literacy, and equity, etc. The board has paid attention to the calls to development of the society, including factors such as security, social capital, and well-being of people from different groups. The UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy (2005) defines sustainable development as *places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.* This definition makes room for social equity and development by emphasizing people's diversity, inclusive needs, equality, and opportunity. The present study has a focus on equity, culture, society, identity, and language that make a great part of social sustainability. Education, especially language literacy, for social sustainability covers a wider sphere of interest. In this respect, the paper redirects the attention of teachers, administrators, and material writers to the issues of equality, acknowledgment, and relevance to every individual or group in the study material. It discusses the significance of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials in sustainable development. Further, it explores the role of teachers as material developers. Before illustrating the examples of extended materials, the context for which the materials prepared is discussed in brief.

## 2. ELT Material for Socio-cultural Sustainability

The ELT materials have the potential to pass knowledge and information to the next generations. The subject matter, as well as competencies incorporated in the material, reflects society's educational canon. In India, the English language curricular package in schools mainly consists of textbooks and

supplementary readers. The curriculum, through the appropriate content selection, can contribute significantly to the education for sustainable development by endowing learners with the ability of decision making. The guideline by UNESCO MGIEP (2017) mentions that; *EDS needs to be reflected in the content of what teachers must teach and the pedagogy they implement. Embedding ESD into core subjects is one of the most effective and efficient ways to achieve SDG Targets 4.7.*

The ELT materials could function as an efficient medium to bring balance in today's uncertain times of growing violence, social injustice, immigration, identity crisis, geographical destruction, global exchange, and communication. There is a need for education for sustainable development that *empowers learners to make informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity* (UNESCO, 2014, p.12). The language teaching materials potentially shape one's thoughts, ideologies, and perspectives to see the world. These could promote equity, social justice, better communication, peace, and global harmony. However, it becomes a great challenge to select and develop materials that are relevant and justifiable to every group of learners. The textbook often has limited content coverage to serve the need of all the students. Therefore, there should be a definite and notable place of supplementary materials in the language curriculum to fill that gap. The supplementary materials can be a greater means to bring learners' culture and context into the classroom. The use of culturally motivated supplementary materials can be constructive in the language classroom to motivate learners' interest and active participation. Besides, teaching through such materials also helps in developing learners' awareness of self and surroundings.

## 3. Teachers as Materials Developers: Supplementary Material

The ELT classrooms in India are multilingual and multicultural with a diverse group of learners. As discussed earlier, the centrally prescribed study materials have limitations in servicing the needs and interests of different groups. The article doesn't disagree with having centrally prescribed textbooks but suggests to supplement that with the extended materials developed by teachers who are well acquainted with learners' context. Teachers could prepare contextual materials representative of the cultural identity of all the individuals in the class. It is, therefore, necessary to train teachers in material development. This article suggests teachers deploy their potential in material development to establishing social justice, equity, and relevance in the class.

For this, first of all, the teachers can identify the different ethnic groups of the learners in the classroom.

Meetings and interaction with the parents can give much insight into the background of the learners. The teachers can sometimes visit the social places of target learners to understand their living and culture. The school should permit such activities and provide time and resources for that. While developing the extended material various resources like published material (story, song, poem, riddles, proverbs etc), internet (audio, video, YouTube clips, short films etc), and authentic materials (cartoon and caricatures, newspapers cuttings, games, original recordings, pictures etc) can be used.

#### 4. The setting of the study

The researcher prepares supplementary materials targeting the students of state government secondary schools that reside within the Dumka district (Jharkhand). These schools have an affiliation to Jharkhand Academic Council (JAC) that follows the NCERT curriculum. The prepared materials could be utilized in the upper middle schools, possibly to the learners of standard VIII. Typical to Indian classrooms, the students in the particular context belong to diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Despite that, their cultures are often mixed and influenced by each-others. The concerned area has learners with different ethnic groups with tribal prevalence. Based on their socio-cultural background, a set of supplementary materials and relevant activities are prepared, which could be a guide to teachers or material designers to adapt in their context.

#### 5. Strategies to develop supplementary materials: Tasks and activities

The study suggests teachers on how to select and develop culturally influenced extended material to which all the students in the classroom can relate. Here are a few examples of such materials that researchers have prepared for the target learners. Several tasks and activities have been prepared through the contents of learners' immediate contexts. The teachers can follow the given strategies in developing extended materials to their context.

##### 5.1. Using the materials that have a reflection of target learners' social sphere

As stated by Asgari (2011), societal factors are important while selecting contents and teaching goals. The socio-cultural contents are directly related to the learners' interests and cognitive abilities (Harrer, Kachalove Borodin & Katchalov, 2014). The reflection of the familiar surroundings makes them feel acknowledged. These factors help to shape learners as a responsible citizen. Inculcating cultural and social traits make them sensitive towards people and society. In this section, one short story, *The poor widow*, by Bompas (2010), has been taken to prepare a task for the target learners. Through the story, the

learners can relate to the class of labourers who depend on an everyday income. Many of the parents of the target learners work on daily wages. Some supernatural elements in the story make it more interesting. Besides, students can very well relate to the terms and concepts used in it. Here is the story:

##### *The poor widow*

Once there was a poor widow who has two children; she lived by daily labour and if she got no work any day, then that day they had to go without food. One morning she went out to look for work and a rich woman called her and asked if she wanted a job; she said *yes, that is what I am looking for*, then the rich woman said *stay here and pick the lice out of my hair, and I will pay you your usual wages and give you your dinner as well*. So the poor widow agreed and spent the day picking out the lice and at the evening the rich woman brought out a measure of rice to give her as her wages and, as she was measuring it, she felt her head itch and she put up her hand and scratched and pulled out a large louse.

Then she got very angry and scolded the widow and said that she would pay her nothing as she has not done her work properly and she turned her out. Then the widow was very unhappy as she had nothing to give her starving children and she wished that she has stuck to her usual work. When she got home and her children began to cry for food, she remembered that she had seen some wild *saru* (vegetable) growing in a certain place; so she took a basket and a sickle and telling her children not to cry and went out to gather it. It was dark and lonely and she felt frightened but then she thought of her children and went on and gathered the *saru*, and returned home crying because she has nothing better to give her offspring. On the way she met an old man who asked her why she was crying and she told him all her story. Then he told her to take the herbs home and chop them all up and to put some in every basket and pot she had and to cook the rest for supper. So when she got home she did as she had been directed and when she came to take the herbs which she had cooked out of the pot, she found that they had turned into rice, and she and her children ate it with joy. The next morning, she found that every pot and basket into which she had put the herbs was full of rice; and from that time she prospered and brought goats and pigs and cattle and lived happily ever after.

But no one knew where the old man came from, as she had forgotten to ask him (Bompas, 2010).

Based on the story, the following types of activities can be derived:

1. Divide the class in the group of two, based on their opinion (against and for) about the following question. Then, commence a discussion/debate on it by asking for the reasons for their justification.
  - Was that rich woman right as she didn't pay the wages to the widow?
  - Do you think such a miracle happens?

2. Regarding the following question, students can be involved in a debate where one can give reasons for her/his selection, and the other can make counter-arguments with her/his different selections.

- What do you think who was that older man whom the widow encountered at night was? Select any one of the given options and justify the reason, why do you think so?
  - a. Ojha b. God c. Magician d. Kind man

5.2. *Using materials that might belong to only one or a few groups in the classroom but with which all students are familiar*

India has cosmopolitan societies, where people are more or less familiar with the culture of each other. The target students are somewhat acquainted with the living styles and cultural values of their fellow mates. According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), the students are more ready to learn from cultural contents if they belong to the cosmopolitan society and where they are familiar with cultural diversity as compared to the students who are part of a closed society. In that case, the teacher can alternatively select the materials from different ethnic groups and prepare the activities on that. It would lead students to understand and respect each other's cultures and customs. As an example, the study, the researchers prepare a task using the cultural song of santals. Songs are the inextricable part of their culture. A good number of songs for almost every occasion like a birth, marriage, festival, death is at their disposal. The romantic love songs to mournful songs have identified to be available among them; in fact, large numbers of songs are already present in published form. Here, one beautiful song of twelve lines is used to prepare the activity. The song is about *Sohrai* which is one of the major festivals of Santals celebrated in Dumka. All learners can surely relate themselves to the poem. The song is like this:

*Elder sister, elder sister  
Go out, O elder sister  
The festival like an elephant  
Is coming near  
You with a lota of water  
I with a cup of water  
Let us go and bring it in  
The festival like an elephant  
You with a plate and water  
I with a long-tailed cow  
With the tail of that cow  
We will fan and bring it in* (Archer, 2016).

The teacher can divide the students into groups in which culturally mixed students are there, and in each group, there needs to be at least one or two Santal students. The teacher can ask if any student knows how to sing the song and motivate them to sing it. This song can be given to the students to read

and then to have a discussion in groups. Various interpretative questions as the following can be asked to the learners:

- a. Which festival is being referred to in the song?
- b. Who do you think addressing the *elder sister*?
- c. What is the significance of *water, plate, cow* and *fan*?
- d. How are the two persons mentioned in the song welcoming the festival? How do you welcome a guest in your house?
- e. Why is the festival being compared with an elephant?
- f. With which different images the festival is being compared?
- g. What is the closest counterpart of the word *lota* in English?

5.3. *Using common heritages/objects of socio-cultural significance*

As the majority of students in a classroom generally belong to the same place or region, objects of cultural values of the place that is familiar to everyone can be used to prepare supplementary materials – for example; river, jungle, monuments, public places, etc. The teacher can variedly make use of common objects in creating different tasks. Such type of content could help them connect more for collaborative works. For the target learners of the study, a task is prepared using the two public heritages of the Dumka District that are Mayurakchhi River and Hijla Mela (Fair) Dwar (Door). The Mayurakchhi River is a lifeline for farming in the region, which provides greater insight into the socio-cultural richness of the particular place. Hijla Mela Dwar is the massive structure behind which the Hijla fair is held every year in the Dumka Community development block.

For developing tasks, the teacher could ask students to narrate two different stories (one by one) related to the two given heritages. The teacher, during the story writing, would give a point/idea every two minutes to assist in creating a plot. The teacher could give five points for each story. The student has to relate those given points with the Hijla Mela Dwar (or Mayuracchi river in the next story) and write about it within the given time slot. The five points that the teacher could provide students while writing a story regarding Hijla Mela Dwar can be; a seven-year-old child with parents, balloons, sweets, lost and found. The five points for another heritage, i.e., Mayurakchhi river, could be; a farmer, his field, rain, crops, and his children. Each student would come up with different interesting stories, probably with the same storylines. At least any five students could be asked to share their stories in the classroom, and rest can be asked to submit. Similarly, the teacher can develop various other tasks.

#### 5.4. Deploying multiple cultures in a single task

Teachers can bring different cultures together in a single task by using materials like pictures, audio-video clips, or text. They can try to search for the materials of different cultures and then prepare the tasks where cultural extracts of all the groups can be incorporated. Suppose a teacher chooses a topic, i.e., dressing style. S/he could collect images of dressing habits of all the cultural groups present in the classroom. S/he could develop a task where s/he can include these images.

Similarly, food culture, folk narrative, means of entertainment, arts, and artifacts, and so on can be selected to develop tasks. For the target classroom, for example, a task can be developed that consists of divergent cultures of the learners. The students belong to different classes, including Farmer, Lohar (who make iron stuff), Potter, etc. The teacher can ask students to perform role-play by taking different roles such as *Farmer and seed seller*, *Potter and buyer*, *Lohar and his son* and many more. Various kinds of tasks or activities could be prepared to owe to varied contexts and resources.

#### 5.5. Students can bring their materials into the classroom

Engaging students in the material collection task can be very exciting. It could encourage their participation and ownership in language learning. The teacher can give them different projects to look for some materials of their choice. For example, the teacher can ask students to bring some newspaper articles, images, recordings of tales and cultural songs, etc. The students can also be asked to bring their collection of pictures from social gatherings and cultural events they have attended. By using such materials, several interesting tasks can be tailored.

#### 5.6. Use of common beliefs and practices

In India, people follow several religions and castes. Despite that, their culture is influenced by each other. According to Buttaro and King (2001), the most favourable second language learning is when students share the same cultural background and can freely take part in the discussion of English content. Therefore, the common festivals, beliefs, or practices can be targeted to formulate classroom contents. In the target classroom, there are heterogeneous tribes, but they have some common festivals. For example, they all celebrate *Sarhul* (festival of tribes), but they celebrate it in different ways.

## 6. Conclusion

The study advocates the significance of a socially and culturally responsive curriculum for sustainable development. Such materials help learners to endure their own as well as others' cultures. It exposes learners to social equity, cultural values, acceptance

for difference, tolerance, respect, and peace. It could help in shaping strong cognitive minds that can make decisions free of prejudices. The paper discusses the various types of materials and strategies for developing materials for social sustenance. In different places or contexts, there should be the availability of different kinds of resources. Every classroom is distinct, and therefore, types and levels of the material may vary from place to place. The teacher needs to understand the context of their learners, their intake level, their ethnic diversity, and the available resources to collect materials for a different set of learners. Using suggested ways and methods, the teacher can collect socio-culturally relevant materials and utilize the given strategies to develop tasks and activities that can appeal to all the learners in their classroom. The suggestions build on Agenda 2030, redirecting teachers to place education for sustainable development (ESD) at the core of ELT materials in a way that is culturally relevant to the students.

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