Abstract: The teaching and learning of English becomes more pertinent especially in the countries which have remained under Colonial Rule of the British for centuries. The acquisition and learning of the English language faced a major impediment in countries like India where the caste system played a very important role in the field of education restricting the access to education exclusively to the children of the elite class. Even after the independence the English language has been occupying the focal point in every sphere of the Indian life. In the context of education for all, focus should be directed towards the education of the underprivileged or the disadvantaged child in the mainstream curriculum – such that he can use English as a tool for social mobility and change the life conditions that he is born into – that of a tea garden labourer with a history of domination and suppression by the elite class of the society. This paper is research based and uses personal experience and involvement with the subject under study - the disadvantaged learner in the guise of the tea garden labourer child (TGLC) for whom education in general, and English education, in particular, is a first generation experience. Placing the disadvantaged child in the context of the sociology of education, the entire process of his movement from a society close to nature to a modern educational situation is traced – whereby we see the TGLC use English as a means to mainstream his life and also as a means of social mobility. In this study, it becomes clear how the disadvantaged child emerges as an individual who is often characterized as the withdrawn, aggressive and lonely child who shies away from all school activities.

Keywords: Disadvantaged learner, Social mobility

Introduction

“A second language affects people’s careers and possible futures, their lives and their very identities” (Vivian Cook, 2001). Today, the world is far from being a monolingual community and majority of the people are bi- or multilingual. With the changing trends, the learning and acquisition of a language other than one’s mother tongue, or Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is no longer restricted to the elite but recognised by a majority as a necessity for each and every individual striving not to be left behind. This has opened up the doors of education also to students for whom formal education is a first time experience. In the context of education in general and the learning and acquisition of a second language to be particular for the first generation learner, of English, in competition with the mainstream learners is a completely new area to be considered. Now, the educator is faced with a heterogeneous group of learners and the role of the teacher emerges as convincingly important – the educator as a facilitator who aids the learner to learn and acquire the second language understanding the learner as a thinking, feeling, sensitive individual from perhaps a closed society. Such a case is the subject under study - the tea garden labourer child (henceforth TGLC), who is a member of the tribal or ‘adivasi’ community in the tea gardens
of Assam, in the north eastern part of India. The TGLC is someone from a culture and tradition close to nature – completely alien to the concept of organised education in a school curriculum.

**English Education in India and English as a Language of Opportunity**

Seen in the context of India with its rich colonial heritage behind, the learning of English as a second language has a long history that dates back to the 19th century when English education was introduced in India for strategic purposes, to create a class of ‘babus’ who would help in the smooth running of administration. It has come a long way since those times till now when English has been accorded the prestigious position of the Associate Official Language, the language of administration, by the Constitution of India. Since then the learning of English in India has seen a rapid rise. With the introduction of the motto of ‘education for all’, education has been prioritised by the government of India. The education of the individual student and his learning of English as a second language find a place of priority in the majority of school goers. One of the most clichéd phrases is that “English opens a window to the world”. Keeping up with this prevalent general attitude in India, English schools have mushroomed all over and today the teaching and learning of English is looked up with pride, because of the sense of prestige and power associated with it. It will not be a mistake to state that India today boasts of a huge population well versed in both the language and literature of its colonial masters. With the urban population, being able to speak in English is sort of taken for granted in India and to quote the words of (Khubchandani et.al.1997), the “English caste” shows a distinct obsession with Western values and act as gatekeepers to upward mobility. So, a knowledge of English is considered to be that extra edge that can pave one’s way to government jobs, jobs into multinational companies, and more recent job opportunities as the call centre industry, the hotel industry etc. – jobs that act as a ladder to social and economic progress. Besides, it is the medium of instruction in all higher educational institutions too. Further, in the multilingual scenario that predominates India, English also acts like a language that bridges the communication gap between the individual and beyond one’s community. Thus, English has always been looked up to as a language of social and economic upliftment – a language that promises confident steps into a ‘better’ future. This further necessitates the learning of English as a very important second language for the entire populace, not to forget the tribal populace which makes up a substantial indigenous minority of 8.14% percentage of the population of India, according to 1991 census. The tribal populace though is referred to as minority, form a distinctive section as they are the original inhabitants of India. In the north eastern parts of India, the tribal community constitutes about 20-30% of the entire population. There is a huge concentration of tribal groups; one of them being the tea tribes that make up the worker section in the various tea gardens of Assam, for whom learning the English language becomes more problematic because it is completely unrelated to the tribal language that TGLC associates with. The parent of the TGLC, though uneducated, is seen to show a positive response to the government educational policies as is evidenced by the number of school beginners that come from the labour community.

**Defining the Disadvantaged Learner**

Thus, the English educators today need to deal with not only the brilliant titan but also the “educationally subnormal” (Burt, 1961) or in simpler terms the “backward child”. Thus arises the absolute necessity of a SLA theory that suits the unique needs of the “disadvantaged child”. The necessity of learning English for both social mobility and economic upliftment
have created a unique situation for the educator of English where the educator is faced with students with widely divergent learning output. This has led to the concept of the disadvantaged child — a child who feels a major handicap in meeting the human potential (Fantini, 1968). It is a relative term that has been so far used to include those who are economically in the low-income group, physically handicapped or belong culturally to that stratum of society, which is a diversion from the mainstream. Thus, in a nutshell, the term disadvantaged includes the lower classes, ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees.

Recent developments in the theories of language learning have proved that there cannot be a single remedy applicable alike to every individual student case. The individual learner — disadvantaged or not, is unique and so are his problems and the obstacles he faces in language learning.

SLA is a large and complex area with many theories contradicting each other. As just mentioned, in every child, the process of acquisition of a language is unique, and no single SLA theory fully explains the process of language learning in a child. Every teacher needs to make various adjustments and modifications to suit the needs of each learner. Besides, when the teacher is dealing with learners with special needs, along with knowledge of SLA theories, the teacher or the educator needs to study every aspect of the child’s development, physical as well as intellectual. One also needs to move beyond the child and examine his environment, his social surroundings, both at home and his school, in the past as well as present. For the disadvantaged child - as for any other child, the self that he brings to the classroom is an interaction of the two- the organism and the habitat, the plant and the soil, the growing child and the circumscribed environment. It is how he adjusts adequately to the requirements of his situation that attribute to his school achievement. “What breaks the camel’s back is not the last straw, but the accumulation of the straws; and the only remedy is to remove each one” (Burt, 1961).

The Subject under Study: The TGLC as the Disadvantaged Learner

Studies have shown that tribal communities live in about 15% of India’s land areas, in various ecological and geo-climatic conditions ranging from plains and forests to hills and inaccessible areas. Tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. While some tribal communities have adopted a mainstream way of life, there are yet others still in the process. In such a category falls the TGLC. The TGLC meets all the conditions that typify him as the disadvantaged child- from an economically poor home, the first generation of ‘active’ learners in the TGL community. Ironically, one of the largest companies in the world market, with perhaps the greatest number of wage earners, the TGLC comes from the houses of some of the lowest wage earners. Born into the system where their forefathers too were plantation workers, working in the tea gardens is the nearest available and perhaps the only source of income. Education in general, and the learning and acquisition of the English language in particular, can be a source of major economic and social upliftment which can help them cross the barriers of class, race and culture and curve for themselves a niche of their own, without the stigma of being born into a working class.

This study was conducted on a heterogeneous group of students in the tea garden school in Assam, the north east part of India, viz., Dimakusi Tea Estate using questionnaires, response sheets, videotaped interviews of the TGLC, their educators, their parents and community who were isolated to arrive at certain conclusions. It looked at the TGLC as a case of the
disadvantaged learner who has to survive and emerge as a literate in the formal school education system while staying in the tea garden itself. It was an attempt at improving the prevalent conditions of the TGLC and finding solutions within the prevalent social system in the tea garden.

**Literature Review**

As the TGLC is a first generation learner in any form of organised education, a review of literature was done starting with education in general and moved on to include the English language learning and acquisition of the TGLC. Education can be seen as an advancement of capacity, well-being and opportunity is uncontested, and more so among communities on the periphery – or the disadvantaged child in the mainstream curriculum. The influence of home and social environment of the disadvantaged learner has been prominently recognised in psychology. Studies have proved, with extensive supporting evidence, that the concept of a fixed and predetermined intelligence is no longer tenable. (Piaget, 1960) considered intelligence to be a function of the general mental adaptability of the organism to the environment. Children, according to him, pass through four general periods of development from birth to adulthood: the Sensori-motor period (birth to two years), the Preconceptual Period (from two to seven), the Period of Concrete Operation (from seven to eleven) and the Period of Formal Operation (from eleven to fifteen). Thus, the home and the social environment are believed to exercise great influence on the intellectual development of children, particularly in the pre-school years.

So long as occupations were and could be carried on within the home and occupational skills could be acquired through observation and repeated practice, an elaborate system was not necessary (Gore et al., 1967). Education in the earlier times seems definitely not synonymous with book learning. In the historical times there was the Brahmanas who trained the princes. The next two castes – the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas were also allowed access to education, but not the lowest caste the Sudras. But as regards learning occupational skills – they were learnt through apprenticeship. Education was neither necessary nor relevant to the practice of most occupations.

The relation of education to social stratification and mobility came up as an arena to be explored only by the 1970s. In modern day industrial societies, most occupations require formal training which are themselves based upon a certain minimum book learning. Successively, higher positions in any occupation or industry require a greater amount of book learning. M.S.A. Rao distinguishes two functions of education: differentiation and selection and opines that formal education prepares individuals for a particular style of life characteristic of a status group (Rao, 1967). It acts as a differentiating agency as it seeks to maintain and supply appropriately socialized individuals to each of the strata. But these processes are seen as distinct from each other only if the selection is on the basis of merit.

With the passage of time, knowledge grew and diversified making it impossible for one teacher to master all fields of knowledge. Gore and Desai (1967) distinguishes three distinct groups interacting with one another –

- a) The teacher
- b) The student
- c) The Administrator
In terms of the educational system in India, the three stages that the Indian education system follows are – the primary or elementary, the secondary and the university level. It is observed that with each successive higher state the number of students taught becomes lesser as the depth and intensity of the subjects become greater. It is to say that the number of students decreases at every successively higher state.

It is on this background of the sociology of education that one can understand better the subject under study – the TGLC in Dimakusi Tea Estate. Seen in terms of the Indian caste system, the TGLC belongs to a community of the Sudras who for generations have been used to manual labour- in this case plucking of tea leaves since the British brought them over as tribal immigrants from Orissa. They comprise basically of such tribes of Orissa as the Santals and the Mundas. The Bodo community, which makes up a major portion of the TGL community in Dimakusi Tea Estate, is also comprised of the aboriginal tribes that inhabited Assam before the first major foreign attackers-the Ahoms, established their kingdom in Assam. So, necessarily, with a tribal background, for the TGLC, their occupation came through apprenticeship – they learnt the trade from their parents. Education was never a requirement. But with the democratization of education and the mass media spreading word of the various alternative job opportunities that education has to offer, education opened the way for better jobs, better lifestyles, and a higher social prestige. Education became an alluring source of upward social mobility.

Dube (1967) opines that the tribe and the peasant are the two examples of established societies. The tribal society has always had a distinct social identity. Away from the mainstream life, they had always led a segmented life, dominated by primary kinship ties, extended family relationships, territorial unity, primary technology and economy and animistic-totemistic beliefs. The tribes lived close to nature and these structural features are in functional adjustment with its pattern of culture and process of socialization. Education for them was learning the trade that the elders in the tribe followed. Dube observes that education is more pragmatic and functional than esoteric and abstracted from the immediate needs of the society. The tribal child thus grows up with no links with the written word- the mainstay of today’s formal educational system.

Thus, in the primitive society, education is linked with the skills necessary to meet the demands of the trade. The process of education and socialization are thus linked to each other and there can be summarized a few of the common characteristics that influenced both the processes. In a tribal society, for instance, there is a combination of work and play - the child is educated in matters of his trade, learns the skill and knowledge of agriculture, trade and primary technology through association with hereditary family lines or the guilds. In matters of relationships, there is a predominance of the kinship category with universal and homogeneous standards of authority. The authority figure is the eldest in the society and he demands full obedience. Because of these arrangements, there is a lot of conflict in the roles played by the teacher and the student. The teacher as an individual to look up to outside his kin does not exist in the traditional tribal society.

**English Learning and Acquisition and the TGLC**

The high rate of school drop outs in the case of the TGLC proves one fact for certain – that the process of learning and acquisition is tough on the disadvantaged TGLC. The TGLC is
seen to attend his first years of primary education only to lapse into illiteracy in his later years – negating all eligibility criteria to enter higher education institutions. This study attempted to look beyond the generalized notions on the disadvantaged child as someone who is withdrawn, frustrated, hostile and aggressive and naturally beyond the capacity to learn anything and that it is a mere wastage of time to try and teach them. It was an attempt to look beyond the fact that they do not want to learn, at as to why they do not want to learn; beyond the fact that they are not interested at as to what they are not interested in; beyond the fact that they do not learn no matter what is taught at as to how can something be taught to them that they learn it. In the context of the TGLC, all these these apply to most of the English teachers. Byeryl (1963) opines that Indications are that the English class triggers the dropout. My study revealed some interesting factors that affect English language learning in the TGLC.

The study arrived at the following factors that act as determinants in hindering the academic progress of the TGLC in a formal educational setting:

1. **Poor Economic Condition and Illiteracy of the Parents**: Being a first generation learner, the TGLC is born to a house where there is no study atmosphere and no one to help in matters of study. The local NGO’s like the Mother’s Club and government measures as the *Sarba Siksha Abhiyan* see that the TGLC is admitted to local school but often again he plays truant to the ignorance of the parents. His needs are left unattended too as the family normally has 5-6 students. Consequently, the need for more hands at work follows to raise the income of the family and hence lead to school dropouts.

2. **First Generation Learner**: Being first generation learners, the TGLC’s contact with formal school setting can be seen as a culture shock and what he encounters there is a complete clash of consciousness which is marked on how successfully he can give up his own tribal values and be one with the mainstream students. As is natural sets in a sense of comparison with the other students and he feels that he is lagging behind, which can prove detrimental at times.

3. **Happy-go-lucky attitude towards life and strong addiction to liquor**: The TGLC is born to a family with little needs – with daily wage payment. They believe in a policy of “Eat drink and be merry, tomorrow you may die,” – are addicted to country liquor *laupani* and once into the process of drinking – they forget about their responsibilities and duties towards their children. The TGLC gets no nutritional food or good clothes to wear. Most evenings are spent in full intoxication and with no one to look into the affairs of the children who are left on their own to do whatever they want. With more and more children born, often the girl child has to leave school to look after younger siblings at home. Another reason is the untimely death of the elders at home which automatically earns for the child a work in the tea gardens and with economic independence, the TGLC sees no need for continuing education at all – and English is a far off question.

4. **Big family with low income**: As mentioned earlier. The TGLC is a member of a large family. Malnutrition and addiction to liquor leads to sickly people at home and malaria and tuberculosis is very common. This is another reason for school drop outs.
5. **Superstitious Nature:** The people of the TGL community are very superstitious and hence believe in destiny. Whenever, the TGLC have to give up education in between he puts all the blame on destiny.

6. **Early Marriage and Free-Mixing:** The tribal communities are born with a free nature and concepts of marriage are flexible and free-mixing allowed. These prove as major diversions to the concentration necessary for learning a second language and a second language as English which is completely foreign to their nature, culture and environment. Free mixing leads to unwanted and untimely pregnancies – leading to marriage and children.

It is seen that the TGLC has a basic positive attitude towards the learning of a second language and looks up to anyone with a command over English with a sense of awe as someone with knowledge of something so prestigious. At some point of time they realize that English language learning is certainly some added qualification that can serve as an extra feather in their cap. They fully realize that a fluency in the language will open the doors of a better future for them. But what is lacking is proper motivation that can take them beyond the initial euphoria towards learning the language and information on the effectiveness of the language to be successful individuals in today’s society. The study reveals that the TGLC is in a social milieu which nurtures in them few aspirations in life and in a community to be an active member of which s/he does not need English as a language of communication. His aspirations, at times, are just to make the two ends meet and he sees no association of English to his daily life. English is a language that can pave his movement outside his family, community and everyday existence and at times the circumstance creates a more comfortable zone of existence. This is what can be seen as a lack of strong instrumental motivation amongst the TGLC. We can blame it on the lack of enough awareness about the job opportunities that English can offer which can result in a social mobility and economic enhancement. We see such a discrepancy in the two facts – the study revealed that the TGLC loves to hear someone speak in English and would love to comprehend English movies and seems charmed by the idea of gaining a mastery over the language. But the TGLC fears rejection by proficient users of English which is one basic fact that makes the TGLC refrain from the use of the language to a total stranger. Shy by nature, perhaps the TGLC fears correction (to him which may seem humiliation) in public. The study revealed that even the English teacher does not talk to them in English. No child can be left to learn the language completely on his own. The data gathered shows that the parents though aware of the necessity of the education and the English language to be successful are blissfully ignorant that they need to be a source of inspiration to the children as well.

**Government Motivation and Educational Reforms**

The government reform needs to start from the grass root level - educating the parents who can further educate the children. Even the TGLC is like any other student of his age – enthusiastic young boys and girls with dreams of a future. Now comes in the very important role of the teacher, the parents and the community as a whole – to inculcate in them a feeling of confidence to learn and acquire the English language so that s/he can use it as a tool for bettering life conditions and also arouse a sense of ambition. The need of the hour is to see to it that the educator of the second language to bear in mind that the TGLC is a first generation learner of English and also the life conditions s/he comes from. It calls for that extra care and concern that the TGLC requires – and perhaps, some extra training on the part of the teacher.
of the TGLC to handle this unique situation of the disadvantaged child in the mainstream curriculum. With all the improvements that have come into the sphere of education, various methods of teaching and training have been developed in the teaching of the second language. It is the time to realise that the TGLC needs special care, a specialized curriculum for real learning to happen.

In 1951, the Parliament passed the Plantations Labour Act [PLA] which sought to provide for the welfare of labour and to regulate the conditions of workers in plantations. Under this law, the State Governments have been empowered to direct the tea management to take all feasible steps to improve the conditions of the plantation workers. The passing of PLA brought some improvements in the plantations sector. It also helped in creating conditions for organizing the workers and the rise of trade unions. However, the potential benefits promised under the PLA remain unachieved mainly due to ignorance of workers about their rights under the law. If the present TGLC educates oneself in the English language, s/he can also be informed about his rights provided by the PLA. As per the guidelines of the PLA, there needs to be a well provided school within the tea garden premises, and though a talk with the Management gives a hint at such facilities, the real scenario is disturbingly pathetic. The students are not provided with books for study and proper classroom facilities. In most of the classrooms the students are compelled to study without even a ceiling fan, in the Indian summer. Ultimately, the learning any student experiences is the product of some teacher’s interpretation, application, and evaluation of a design for learning. It cannot be denied that much of the research done on the topic proves one fact- the crucial period at which to affect the learning attitudes of the disadvantaged is at the pre-primary or the primary level. A capacity to use the language academically will empower the TGLC to know what his rights are as a member of the disadvantaged class and better life conditions for his people engulfed in shackles of exploitation from time immemorial.

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