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Comprehension Of Radio Lessons
In English By Rural Audience

By

J Majumdar
Comprehension of Radio lessons in English by rural audiences.

J. Majumdar

After three decades of educational broadcasting in India and the continued presence of English as a subject (compulsory or optional) in primary schools of most of our states, one would expect radio lessons in English to be something of a fait accompli. But this is certainly not the case. Take, Andhra Pradesh, for instance, where the circumstances are considered more favourable than those in other states. The Central Institute of English which has the facilities for producing taped English-teaching lessons for all levels of learners is situated in Hyderabad. All India Radio, Hyderabad has been broadcasting English-teaching courses as part of its high school programme, regularly, for the last twelve years. The Department of Education made it compulsory for schools to listen to these programmes and thereupon enabled several rural schools to acquire radio sets. Finally, English is a compulsory subject of study irrespective of the medium of instruction, in this state, from the Vth to the final year of school.

In spite of all this the overall picture of listening in suburban and rural Andhra is discouraging. A research student of the CIE undertook a survey of the use of the English language radio lessons in the districts of Andhra. It is a measure of the shortfall in communication between production centre and receiving points, perhaps, that most of the questionnaires posted to schools were never returned. The researcher collected information from personal interviews with teachers, the truth and validity of which is borne out by the State Council of Educational Research and Training. Most of the physical difficulties reported appertain to the problems of educational broadcasting in general, viz. the non-availability of radio-sets in working condition, poor listening conditions, ill-equipped classrooms, overworked teachers who lack the training to integrate broadcasts into their classroom teaching, time-trabbling difficulties, rigid syllabuses and so on. However, the following observations are specific to English lessons:-

1. Those teachers who listed regularly report favourably on their own and their students' reactions,
2. However the pronunciation being a standard Indian and kept as free from regional variations as possible is not easily "followed" by the pupils,
3. The speed of presentation is too high for rural audiences,
4. The participation as the pupils in speech drills and question answering exercises initiated by the radio-presenter is not always favoured by the teachers, because the instructions and examples are 'not followed' by the pupils or the activity creates problems of discipline,
5. Anyone professionally committed to the interests of the media and education in this country has the following clues, therefore, to work with. First, the general response to the lessons is positive, for whatever reasons. Other English-teaching agents, both individuals and institutes, have reported similar interest and enjoyment on the part of their audiences to their own English-teaching radio lessons. Individual correspondents, the personal observation of the CIE Radio staff and the Executive Producer of Educational Broadcasts, AIR, Hyderabad reveal that the English teaching radio lessons can be enjoyed with a minimum of organization in the rural classroom and outside.
Second, the question of comprehension keeps recurring. The main difficulties are ascribed to speed and an unfamiliar accent but the listener may just as well be reacting to an overloading of the channel from sources like conceptional content or sophisticated media technique. The difficulty of standardizing the teaching of a "second" rather than a "foreign" language, as English is in India, is that the learner and the teacher in relatively remote places are at least acquainted with a regional version of the language and have certain expectations about it and the way it should be taught.

Finally, the demand for English-teaching broadcasts has been strong enough at the primary, secondary and tertiary stages of education for twenty-five stations of All India Radio to wish to supplement locally male broadcasts with some series produced centrally at the CLuFL. For the beginners series, teaching points and instructions are dubbed into the regional language by the local AIR stations and the attempt is to gradually wean the listeners away from this prop. This series follows the NCERT structural syllabus quite closely but not the textbook. The secondary series take up topics of general interest like national festivals and discoveries and invention. The aim here is to present the language as a means of acquiring and conveying information both attractively and logically. The syllabus therefore is less closely adhered to and allows for modification to suit regional needs.

In the light of the above circumstances as they exist, the topic of this paper gains significance. The purpose of rural radio- and tele-broadcasts is to quote SITE literature, "to bring our rural population out of their isolated situations into the mainstream of Indian culture". Now, insofar as the English language is concerned, it adheres to the mainstream of Indian culture because till the present moment the major decisions about the future of the people have been made in the urban centres by people who know how to use the English language for their purposes, whether or not they wish to do so. Besides, urbanization of the individual is still a concomitant of better employment and other social opportunities. More important than that these facts are so, is that they are supposed to be so by the majority of our non-urban population. This observation is of course open to any modification that the results of AIR audience research might require. The unofficial estimates of the AIR audience research can be taken as working information on how far Indian listeners rely on English language news broadcasts for their intake of information of national and international importance. For the late evening English news, by far the most popular, it is estimated that about 30% of registered radio sets are tuned in in cities and towns while in the villages the figure is at less than 10%.

Before the problem of the rural learners' comprehension of English-teaching lessons can be analysed, it is necessary to realize that all the information that is relevant to a villager in his village situation is available to him in his own language. For most adult learners' programmes on basic education and agricultural reforms in which they or their representatives can participate (eg. The Radio Rural Reform project, studied for UNESCO, near Poona) are obviously more attractive than programmes teaching a language for which they have an immediate need. This is not to say that programmes should not be produced at the tertiary or non-formal levels of education for rural audiences. If it is within the power of the English teacher to present interesting information in an interesting manner, it is surely
proper for the mass media to take full advantage of this. Often
the media teaches while it entertains and in both the areas of
education and entertainment the human mind has such complex needs
that we cannot lay down laws, we can only talk about priorities.

School broadcasts have a definable purpose, however. In the
interests of the equality of opportunity promised to all Indian
citizens, it is necessary to make available to every student,
rural or urban, the minimal quantity of high-quality English
language teaching, so that no individual is prevented from building
upon this foundation of language if ever he feels the need. What
the minimal quantity is, is determined by the planners of educa­
tion. English teachers and Institutes are concemed with the
quality and the media is concerned with wide distribution.

The motivations of children
not being utilitarian in the adult sense of the term, it is usual
to exert a certain amount of persuasion on them through an appeal
to their natural curiosity, instinct for imitation, and at a
later age, trial and error problem-solving and dramatic story­
telling.

The word 'comprehension' in this context has a totally diffe­
rent meaning from the meaning of the word in general use. In any
learning situation and especially in a language learning situation,
the only measure of 'comprehension' is behaviour. It is not enough
to get the response, Yes, I do, to the question, Do you understand
this? The learner must do something to show that he really has
understood and can apply the instruction ultimately. Since the
mass-media has no inbuilt properties of feedback, it has to be
closely integrated into a whole infra-structure of teaching to
make the monitoring of pupil-response possible. This has been done
in Australia through a two-way radio system and an efficient
'correspondence service which organizes periodical contact programs.
Most other successful experiments in the classroom use of the media
have depended heavily upon trained monitors who maintained close
and constant link with the production base.

This system is not feasible on a national scale in a large
country where excellence of English-teaching personnel and material
is found in urban areas where the broadcasts or telecasts must
necessarily be produced. The teacher in the village classroom is
to be reached either by post or through the media itself. Organ­
ing training programmes is a time-consuming task and it also
prevents the teacher from trying out new ideas in his usual
environment while he is learning.

Given the above situation, the maker of English teaching
programmes has to further modify his ideas about 'comprehension'.
Without the practical aid of feedback, he has to rely heavily on
theory. Without going into educational and communication theory,
one can list the major considerations as the following:-

a) the English language in rural India is heavily reliant
on grammar books and drills. Since this is already available
to the teacher, the media should not duplicate this but
try to put at the teacher's disposal a wealth of material
in the shape of dramatized stories, language-games, songs etc.
which encourage experimentation with language (a natural
activity in acquiring one's mother tongue) and not necessarily
the 'correct' response;

1 Thailand: Tests administered after experimental primary school
English radio lessons showed that in spite of poor reception,
the imitation of intonation by the children was excellent.
b) a great deal of redundancy should be built into the lessons, so that the learners are exposed to the correct forms and usage of the language items at regular intervals. The situational framework may vary for the sake of interest, but where monitoring is un-controlled, the radio teacher has to depend on spaced, controlled repetition to get his message across;

c) non-verbal sources can also be exploited for redundancy. It is the function of the media to bring the experience of life into the classroom. If this 'life-experience' is, in its noises and pace and silences accessible to the listener it already provides him with a context for the unfamiliar verbal signals that he is required to 'comprehend'. A great deal of creative research can be done in this area;

d) the paradox of cultural references is that when the maker of a programme is most culturally specific, he is most natural and authentic and therefore most universally convincing. Here again the attention should be on the general tone or world-view projected by a series, rather than instances of cultural reference;

e) the teacher should be given instructions for as many ways of handling the English-teaching programmes as possible. In this way one can ensure that every classroom, indeed, perhaps every individual in a classroom profits in some way from the programmes;

f) it is a commonplace that programmes for children, especially rural children, should make use of simple straightforward presentation techniques. This is usually done in English-teaching lessons. A single pattern is adhered to so as to build up expectation for the periodic highlighting of language points.

The above principles of programme-making do not make feedback unnecessary. Feedback can record data other than correct responses. In an uncontrolled situation like ours, it is unfair to ask the teacher whether the pupils can write, read or speak sentences like those taught on the radio, or answer questions on what they have just heard. The kind of feedback one can safely begin with is the kind initiated by the makers of the series for American inner-city pre-schoolers called Sesame Street. The series was played to Jamaican children of various ages who had never been exposed to television. In the listening tent, a distracting light-signal was mounted within the eye-span of the audience and a video-tape camera was mounted over the TV monitor to record the children's reactions. This is sophisticated equipment indeed, but available in India, and the saving in terms of broadcasting errors avoided would in educational terms be immeasurable. The initial reports are of interest to us.

1. The highest level of attention came from the age-group for which the series was made. Urban and rural differences of experience therefore do not operate significantly in the programmes.

2. Attention dropped after the first three minutes of each new section of each programme. After constant viewing the ability to sustain attention seems to have been acquired by many of the viewers.

3. Music seems to be a separate effect structuring attention and interacts with visuals to produce high levels of attention.
4. The children were specially attentive to programmes which had unusual visual effects like pixillation, split-screens etc. While we cannot make inferences about comprehension of these visual effects, their appeal to the inexperienced viewers was clear.

5. Street scenes and puppets received less attention than studio scenes, film, animation.

Checking 'comprehension' of educational material present through the media for audiences with limited English and media experience, therefore also entails observations of the processes underlying the acts of listening to and taking instructions from a disembodied voice, in an unfamiliar tongue. When we require the rural learner to 'comprehend' our radio lessons we do not demand more or less than his classroom teacher ought to demand. We demand something different. We demand that he involve himself in the world we are creating for him through the medium of English and thereby go beyond the limitations of his textbooks in realizing that language is not information, it is activity.

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