

LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS: STUDY OF NCERT ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS IN PRIMARY CLASSES

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Abstract

Modern humans(Homo sapiens) whose ancestors were apes(animals), evolved and have become a serious threat to all other animals of the earth. Environmental degradation is one of the ten threats identified in the report of United Nations' High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in 2004. Present Covid-19 situation has forced us to ponder and change our attitude, actions towards Environment. It would be better if we start inculcating environmental values at an early age. Children have intimate contact with nature, they enjoy even small experiences with nature as sitting under a tree or listening to a bird, but rapid urbanisation, and 'fear culture' have stolen these opportunities from children. We need to look for new ways to revive children's love for Environment. School Textbooks can be a good source for this work. Although Environmental Studies(EVS) is now a full-time subject in Primary Classes, yet other subjects in an interdisciplinary approach can also play a key role in teaching environmental values. The purpose of this paper is to study NCERT English Textbooks in Primary Classes, their relationship with Environmental Science and their role in developing an awareness and love for natural, social and cultural environment in young children.

Keywords: *Environmental degradation, Children and Environment, Language teaching and Environmental Science.*

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The world is not left to us by our parents,
It is lent to us by our children. (African proverb)

The ubiquitous Covid-19 has impeded all human activities throughout the world. It gives us a chance to stop and ponder our actions; excessive exploitation of natural resources, mitigation of space for forest and wildlife and strange food habits of certain countries. All life on earth is connected and related to each other, humans whose ancestors were apes (animals) have become a serious threat to all other animals of earth. Environmental degradation is one of the ten threats identified in report of United Nations' High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in 2004. The developmental changes in the past 200 years have done greater damage to the natural environment and now we have reached a stage where we need to change our attitude and actions towards the environment. It would be better if we start inculcating environmental values in our younger generation too because children are very close to nature, by providing early experiences with nature teachers purposefully support children's development of scientific and aesthetic thinking, so they can 'appreciate beauty, express creativity and perceive patterns and develop senses' (Torquati and Barber 2005).

Children and Environment

A new generation must live a better life than the last. Technological advancement aids the new generation but with this, they always inherent fewer natural resources than the last. So, it is important to teach the new generation about their environment at an early age. The attitude they keep towards the environment, the habits they learn will shape their future. Ecologists, environmental psychologists, and others suggest that we all have a natural

attraction, or affinity, for life (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Orr, 1994). This affinity for life has been referred to by E.O. Wilson (1984, 1992) as *biophilia* (i.e., a love of nature). If this natural attraction is not encouraged or given opportunities to flourish during the early years of life, the opposite, *biophobia* (i.e., an aversion to nature), may occur (Orr, 1994). "Biophobia ranges from discomfort in 'natural' places to active scorn for whatever is not manmade, managed, or air-conditioned" (Orr, 1994, p. 131). The responsibility for generating *biophilia* (love of nature) in children lies on us. Children learn a lot from their social environment, the attitude, feelings and reactions of their parents, teachers and peer group towards the environment affect them directly or indirectly. 'One of the greatest tasks for society then is to equip children with the attitudes, values, knowledge and skills necessary to rethink and change current patterns of action and to secure healthy, just and sustainable futures for all'. (Davis and Cooke, 1996). Family is the very first place where a child learns to love nature. Cultural practices such as telling stories, narrating folk tales to children by their grandparents or parents have a direct and indirect effect on child psychology but now-a-days these practices are diminishing as these practices get replaced by mobile phones. The next place for a child's exposure to this world is school. Schools being an influential part of our society must be sensitive to environmental concerns. Children should have exposure to the environment at an early age and the first step of this ladder is to let children enjoy and understand the environment. 'Now is the time for the early childhood educators to catch up with community concerns about environmental issues and to take a leadership role in an area in which we have the potential "to make a difference"'. (Davis, Julie, 1998).

In the 21st century children have very limited access to the natural environment, due to rapid urbanisation there are a few places left where children can interact with the natural environment. Even in school concrete buildings and air conditioner have replaced children learning under the open sky and in the fresh air. 'The benefits of natural settings were found to be diverse, like nature itself. Natural settings stimulate all aspects of child development through multi-sensory experience'. (Moore, 1997) The tightly defined out-of-school schedules of many middle-class children have left them with hardly any free time, including time for free play outdoors. Moore (1997) states many reasons behind this like Changing family relations, Electronic media, Air conditioning and Commercialisation of play.

Children's exposure to environmental studies start early at their school, National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 based on the National Policy on Education 1986, recommends Environmental Studies to be taught as integration of Science, Social Science and Environmental Education at the primary stage. It exists as a separate curricular area from Classes III to V. However, at Classes I and II the related concerns are addressed through language and mathematics. The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate books intended for Environmental Studies in primary level rather use an interdisciplinary approach and analyse English Textbooks (I-V) to study how a teacher while teaching English language can address Environmental issues.

English and Environmental Studies (EVS)

A textbook is a significant curricular input that propels and navigates the curriculum. Of the many kinds of texts available to the modern reader, the school textbook bears a unique and significant social function: to represent to each generation of students an officially sanctioned, authorised version of human knowledge and culture (De Castell, 1990). There are two series of books available for English (NCERT) namely *Marigold* and *Raindrops*. *Raindrops* is a special series that is designed for first-generation school goer. There are lots of children in India who come from rural or tribal background, whose parents are not much qualified to help their children in studies. These children can easily connect with this series. The first thing that comes to our mind when we think about Environment Studies is Plants, Animals, Water, Earth and Pollution etc. but all these elements are just one part of EVS.

EVS can be divided into three main parts:

1. Natural Environment
2. Social Environment
3. Cultural Environment.

We also need to focus on the other two parts of EVS; Social Environment and Cultural Environment. Environmental Studies is an approach to the learning of environment in its totality without being burdened by any disciplinary considerations. The major focus area of EVS is- learning for the environment, learning about the environment and learning through

the environment. The curriculum for Environmental Studies in primary classes revolves around six themes.

Themes

1. Friends and Family
2. Food
3. Shelter
4. Water
5. Travel
6. Things we make and do.

Sub-themes-

1. Relationship
2. Work and Play
3. Animals
4. Plants

If we scan all English textbooks (I-V), we can find out many ways to sensitize the children about different elements of Environmental Studies. Here are some of the examples to teach EVS while teaching English language.

Natural Environment


There are many chapters in English textbooks (I-V) that revolve around animals, plants, water and earth. All these themes come under natural environment. Children at the early age love animals, plants and water. Language textbooks in primary classes especially I-III are full of lessons and poems in which these themes are used to teach language. So, if a language teacher uses an interdisciplinary approach, he/she can also sensitise children towards environment and environmental issues.



All the chapters in class-I Marigold, Raindrops and class-II Marigold include themes of animals or plants. Chapter-1 The Magic Garden, chapter-2 Birds Talk, chapter-3 Little by Little and chapter-7 Puppy and I in Marigold for class-III also incorporate the theme of

animals or plants. In some chapters like Lulu and Peelu, Mittu and the Yellow Mango, I Want, The Ship of the Desert etc. animals and birds are personified and

(Picture-1) given human names and feelings, children can easily relate to such kind of stories and develop love for natural environment. Picture-1 is taken from chapter-4 Our Tree in *Marigold* class-I. This is an activity given at the end of this chapter, if the language teacher asks children to perform these kinds of activities at their home, children will indirectly learn and develop a strong bond with natural environment. In this way, a teacher can use environmental objects and 'environment' as a learning resource. If learning occurs beyond the walls of the classrooms, the quality of learning will become better. Chapter-1 The Paddling Pool, Chapter-4 Rain, Counting Clouds in *Marigold* class-II and chapter-4 Sea Song, The Little Fish Story in *Marigold* class-III incorporate the theme of Water. Water pollution, water scarcity etc topics can be discussed while teaching these chapters. The theme of Travel is covered in chapter-6 Train, The Story of the Road. It narrates journey of a train through different lands and landforms like plain, mountains, rivers etc. There are many poems in English textbooks(I-V) that disseminate awareness of environmental issues. A language teacher can search or write more poems for the conservation of natural resources, given below is an example of a poem that convey a message for water conservation.



*Drip, Drip, Drip
Is not a good sound,
If you let it go on,
Soon no water will be found.
Don't take long showers,
Don't wash your car,
The water we have,
Won't go very far.*

Social Environment



Raindrops series for class-II mostly focuses on social and cultural environment. There are also some chapters in other classes that are dedicated to social issues present around us. Chapter-3 My Family in *Raindrops* for class II focuses on the theme Friends and Family. The child is sensitised towards his/her immediate environment

through poem and assessment given at the end of the chapters. Chapter-7 My Village, chapter-9 Work and chapter-13 Going to the Fair in *Raindrops* (Picture-2)

for Class-II talks about people around us or immediate social environment. These chapters revolve around rural life and different occupations found in rural environment.



Chapter-4 What's Going On in *Raindrops* for class II is centered on social inclusion. A picture is worth a thousand words. On the surface level, picture-3 from this chapter seems very ordinary but it carries a deeper meaning. A child sitting on the wheelchair playing carrom with other children. The idea of inclusiveness is

brought indirectly that what matters is the skill of the child in playing carrom. The other children have accepted her as one of them. Similar

(Picture -3) theme is discussed in the chapter-5 Helen Keller in *Marigold* class-IV. It is about a girl who is disabled and how she overcomes her weakness. The chapter also discusses the power of language, sign language used for deaf and dumb and brail script used for blind people.

Cultural Environment

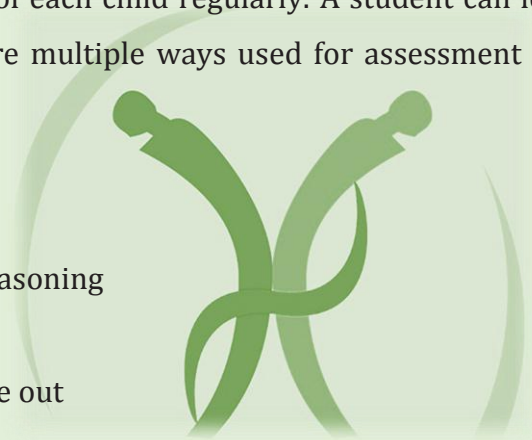
In the rapidly developing world of 21st century, it is essential to familiarise the children with cultural practices of their society. EVS learning cultivates respect for cultural diversity and sensitises children regarding the minority and people with special needs. Prejudices and discrimination are challenged, while respect and mutual understanding is promoted. Chapter 10 Our National Symbol, chapter 11 The Festival of India in *Raindrops* for class-II incorporates themes of cultural environment. It is beneficial for the children to

know about different cultural festivals as well as cultural heritage of India. Similarly, chapter 15 Sikkim in the same book talks about Sikkim, its landforms, languages, food and agricultural practices. Chapter-1 Wonderful Waste in Marigold for class-V narrates a story of a wonderful dish Avial made from vegetable scraps. It talks about how Avail becomes a traditional food in Kerala. It also covers themes of recycling waste and avoiding wastage of food. Chapter-10 Who will be Ningthou in the same book highlights gender awareness, multilingualism and environmental love for all creatures. This story is about an old king in Manipur who chooses her daughter as Tunggi Ningthou (future king) over his three sons for her leadership qualities and love for all creatures.

EVS and Assessment of English language

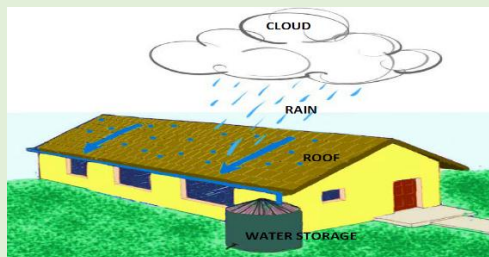
Assessment is an integral and important part of teaching-learning process. With the help of assessment a teacher can know about his/her achievement of teaching-learning outcomes and track the progress of each child regularly. A student can learn about his/her strength and weakness. There are multiple ways used for assessment in primary classes, some of them are

1. Picture Reading
2. Fill in the blanks
3. Data analysis/Reasoning
4. Picture Puzzle
5. Circle the odd one out
6. True and False
7. Choose the correct option
8. Sequencing
9. Word Grid
10. Creative description
11. Match the Columns
12. Analogy
13. Making a list
14. Short answer questions



If a language teacher applies some effort, he/she can make some assessment tools that can assess children’s language learning as well as their knowledge of EVS. Given below are some of the examples of assessment tools that are designed in an integrated way to assess both language and EVS.

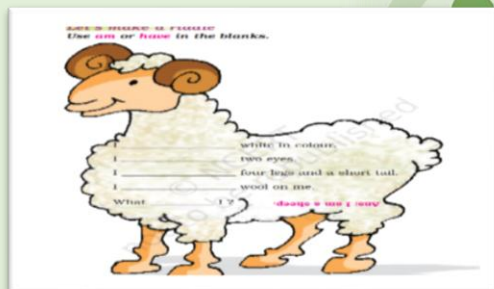
1. Picture Reading



Picture-4, such kind of pictures can be shown in a chapter based on the theme Water and some questions can be asked based on observation and critical thinking for example;

- Que 1 What can you see in the picture?
- Que 2 Why does the house has a slanting roof?
- Que 3 Where is the rainwater going from the roof?
- Que 4 Why is the rainwater being collected?

2. Picture Puzzle



Picture-5 is an example of picture puzzle. Here the children need to fill ‘am’ or ‘have’ in the blanks and at the end they will also solve a riddle: What is the name of this animal? This kind of exercise is useful in class 1 and class 2, children are learning grammar and also about animals. The teacher can ask more questions

about this animal. In this way we can integrate both the subjects, on the other hand, the children in primary classes will also take (Picture-5) interest in solving such kind of picture puzzles having animals or birds.

3. Making a List

- Que 1 Your birthday is next week. Make a list of all the things you need to do for the event starting with the guests list, sending out invitation etc.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary and integrated approach can be a powerful tool for teaching EVS through language. A language teacher must be aware of various themes focussed in EVS in

primary classes and then he/she can relate poems and stories with the child's immediate surroundings. He/she can provide the children opportunities to interact with the environment and can use the environment as a resource.

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