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English: Excellence Little by Little

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A sixth-grade student in some village school in Tamil Nadu flips through an English textbook. What awaits him there is linguistics; hard sentences and new vocabularies that are completely unrelated to his comprehension ability. Why does youth struggle, unable to speak even two sentences with confidence in an interview, after studying English as a subject for twelve years in school and then three years in college?

A child learns a language by first listening, then speaking, and only after that reading and writing. This is nature. But our textbook has turned this order upside down. Neglecting the basics of listening and speaking, knowing only facts, and considering 'memorizing and writing' as language education is the great mistake. The first mistake was turning English into something like mathematical formulas for students who have no opportunity to speak English outside the classroom.

Four Secrets

Are today's textbooks teaching English, or are they translating science, social science concepts, and historical facts into English and thrusting them?

In the sixth-grade book, there is a lesson about 'sea turtles' spanning four pages. But, the sentences and words in it are at a level of a graduate.

Here, we must observe the four secrets shown by the 'Oxford New English File' international English teaching textbook series written by Clive Oxenden:

1. **Grammar and Lesson:** Grammar is not separate; starting with simple sentences, without the students knowing it, moving them to simple sentence structures seamlessly through the lesson.
2. **Self-Assessment:** Simple speaking exercises after each lesson where students check themselves, which plants the confidence of 'I know' in them.
3. **Age-Appropriate Style:** Handling words and sentence structures according to the maturity of the students.
4. **Practical English:** The content of the English lesson should be what is needed to speak in daily life.

Five Guidelines

The Tamil Nadu School Education Department, without delaying time any further, should take forward the following changes:

1. **New Textbooks of International Alliance:** Exclusive textbooks should be created for Tamil Nadu students by partnering with world-class publishing houses like Oxford, Cambridge, and Macmillan.
2. **Simplified Lessons:** No lesson should exceed 'two pages'. Long lessons give fatigue to students. Starting from stories related to the daily social environment of students, it should move towards the depth of the language with the vision of 'little by little excellence'.
3. **Revolution in Exam and Assessment:** Avoiding keeping English as one of the five subjects, it should be divided into three parts (Tamil, English, other subjects) like in colleges. In assessment, the importance given to the written exam should be reduced; at least 70% of marks can be given for Oral, Listening, and Comprehension skills.
4. **Exclusive 'Digital Hub':** To extend learning outside the classroom, the government should create a dedicated website suitable for Tamil Nadu students. It should create an environment where students can learn on their own through videos, audio files, pronunciation-testing facilities, and stories.
5. **World-Class Teacher Training, Handbooks for Teachers:** Continuous training of international standard should be provided to teachers. Along with this, a detailed teacher's guide (Teacher's Guide) on how to teach each lesson must be provided. Instead of being an 'authority' who corrects a student when they make a mistake, a teacher should change into an encouraging 'guide'.

It is not enough if English is just a 'subject'; it must change into a 'skill' for students. Leaving aside stuffing concepts and knowledge into the English textbook, let us move towards a simple practical method. Let us reduce the weight of the textbook; let us increase the taste of the language.

English is not knowledge; it is a tool to acquire knowledge. Let that key become easily available to the student studying in a village school too! Only then, a new generation will emerge one day, which interacts confidently with the world outside the classroom.

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