

**RESTRUCTURING HIGHER SECONDARY ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS IN ODISHA:  
REMEDIAL MEASURES**

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**Abstract:**

In a developing state like Odisha where English is taught as a second/foreign language by the teachers who do not have training in ELT and whose English is poor, textbooks play a very crucial role in teaching and learning of English. Further in our academic context, the same textbook is used for a wider geographical area covering a great number of learners. Thus, while there is a great need for very careful and scientific preparation of textbooks, often they are prepared by persons with little knowledge of the science of textbook preparation in English resulting in production of books that are defective, unsuitable and not facilitating the teaching/learning of English. In an alarming concern English textbooks at Higher Secondary level in Odisha are found to be substandard, defective and unsuitable so far the objectives of the syllabus and the course materials are in question. Hence remedial measures are indispensably to be adopted at different levels to bring about favourable changes in English education at Higher secondary level and this paper aims at dealing with the same.

**Key words:** *textbooks, inappropriate materials, remedial measures.*

The importance of textbook as the potential instrument for teaching and learning of English is widely established. Textbook is the source of language learning in an organised and systematic way. The different aspects of the language with its structural facts as well as step-wise guide to acquire the language skills can be dealt productively with the help of a textbook. Considering the thriving global importance of English language, the purpose of teaching English as a second language is primarily driven to promote the language skills in learners. In this regard, the textbooks can be used as a base of language learning process as the course materials include the essential elements that embody a set of skills, a set of language patterns and associated vocabulary. On the other hand, the significance of textbook can be realised in the line that it ensures a context in order to make language teaching interesting as teaching of language in isolation is mechanical, monotonous and less productive. By providing the readymade contexts the textbook facilitates the programme of language teaching and learning where the teachers are only to act as a coordinator between the material and learners. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) state that "the textbook is an almost universal element of English language teaching" and Sheldon (1988) argues that textbooks articulate "the visible heart of any ELT programme" and provide considerable

advantages for both students and teachers. Similarly Cunningsworth(1995) view the role of textbook as an effective material for self-directed learning and self-study; an important source for presentation of written and spoken material; valuable materials that provide ideas and activities for practice and interaction for learners and a helping hand for teachers having a little experience to gain confidence and use new methodologies. Hence textbooks are unarguably the most popular teaching materials in foreign language classes.

The importance of textbooks in our academic setting is non-debatable. In a state like Odisha where English is taught as a second language, textbooks are well-knit to teaching and learning situations. Since our context of teaching and learning is generally classroom-confined both the teachers and learners do heavily depend upon textbooks. Further in poor state like Odisha where the government fails to provide modern teaching aids, work book, teachers and learners guides, textbooks become indispensable as the most reliable teaching material for language learning. Apart from academic obligations, textbooks from our cultural perspective as such are considered sacrosanct for it occupies a sacred position in the collective consciousness, which finds a religious outlet on certain days in calendar when they are worshipped. Because the learners view the text as religious awe, they learn with interest what is there in the book. Moreover, textbook with an appended workbook can be a self-learning tool for students belonging to the weaker or unprivileged sections of the society. Apart from being looked upon as a disciplinary device to control large classes, a textbook helps the teachers to make students converge on a point. As Kundu(1994) states “textbooks are the first and often the most important exposure to English for our learners of English”.

Realising the importance of textbooks in our context as the universally reliable resource for teaching and learning, a comprehensive study on the evolutionary history of Higher Secondary English textbooks synthesized with a sweeping critical evaluation of the materials is briefly outlined below. The entire history of English textbooks at Higher Secondary level could be analysed on the basis of two larger periods of the entire time span, i.e. pre-Council and post-Council era. And so far as the science, principles and approach of textbook preparations are in question the history of textbook preparation at Higher Secondary level in Odisha fundamentally epitomises two facets of textbook writing; textbooks with literature approach and books with an ELT orientation.

The textbook preparation in the pre-council era was mainly characterised by the unholy nexus among individual writers, private publishers and Board of members which resulted in the production of extremely unsuitable or bad textbooks. With the inception of council as an autonomous body in 1983, the fate of textbook preparation changed. The old syndrome of ‘influence and manipulation’ though not stopped completely but reduced to a considerable extent as the council took upon itself the task of textbook preparation. However, for a long period of 17 years (1983-2000), the textbooks remained insulated from ELT approach primarily because their preparation was left to the group of editors without any ELT expertise or knowledge. The four sets of detailed texts prescribed during this period were Prose for the Young, Poems for the Young- 1983; Prose of our Time, Pansies of Poetry- 1987; Voice of

Life, Vision of Life- 1991; Speaking Tree, Singing Bird- 1995. All the books from 1983 to 2000 starting with 'Prose for the Young', 'Poems for the Young' and ending with 'Singing Birds' and 'Speaking Tree' continued with literature orientation and structural approach. Topics were not chosen with learners in view. Materials were tough, uninteresting, not age-appropriate and suffered from heavy old-age bias.

Shortcomings of all these texts used by the council for the period 1983-2000 created strong resentment among teachers and intelligentsia and invited a series of complaints. As a result for the first time the council entrusted the task of English textbook making to a panel of ELT experts headed by B.K. Das to bring about a tangible change in the making of textbook preparation. Titled Invitation to English-1, Book-2, Book-3 and Book-4 and based on ELT approaches the books were expected to open up new vistas in the teaching of English. This was undoubtedly a welcome change as the new materials removed many major problems of the previous textbooks based on literature approach. The book was made with approaches of ELT could be argued on the basis of its exhaustive introduction, variety of topics, division of lessons into units and tasks and activities assimilated there in. The changes brought about by Invitation to English-1 to 4 were a welcome development but the editors lack contact with ground reality. The most glaring mistake that the editors committed was to prescribe same set of books for all streams of students which was a gross violation of ESP (English for Specific purpose). Many of the materials in the detailed text invitation to English-1 were quite difficult and unsuitable and could never lend themselves to the implementation of the method that the text prescribed. So far as the topics were in question, materials and methods made their own way. Similarly ELT experts adopted non-ELT approach like giving glossing of the words before the texts, thereby preventing the learners to guess from the context. Despite limitations the text was an excellent ELT approach-based book and would have helped learners improve their English language skills but it failed as the teachers not being trained in ELT prior to the implementation of the text, used their age-old method of teaching English by explaining/lecturing instead of the new ELT, learner-centred interactive method.

The new text Invitation to English-1 (new edition) published in 2012 and which is currently in use is in fact a striking example of the intellectual debacle triggered by the new editors. The new text undergoes a spectacular spiral down so far the science of textbook preparation and ELT approach is concerned and in fact has gone back to the old literature approach or even the worst. The plethora of limitations that the text suffers from can be summed up in the following points-

- i. Selection of old pieces of writing
- ii. Difficult text with no adaption/inappropriate materials
- iii. No grading
- iv. No method of teaching in mind
- v. Poor glossing
- vi. Poor and insufficient language exercises/activities
- vii. Inappropriate lead-in and comprehension questions

viii. No introduction to the anthology and instruction for teachers and students.

Similarly the other two books in use Invitation to English-3 and 4 disclose the strong intellectual inertia that council suffers from as the same old books with identical examples, activities without any adaption or improvisation have been in use for long 19 years and still counting.

The discussion above exposes the sorry state of affairs in English textbook preparation at Higher Secondary level which in turn also exposes the low language proficiency of majority of Odia students. In the light of the facts stated above the following set of remedial measures can be adopted at the administrative, academic and grass root level to produce ideal textbooks in particular and to bring about a transformation in English language teaching in the state of Odisha in general.

The first step in that direction is that Government of Odisha should have a clear-cut language policy which would spell out the place of English at Primary, Secondary, Higher Secondary and Undergraduate level. Whether English be taught as Compulsory Second language or as an optional subject? This is all the mere necessary because after the introduction of Choice Based Credit System at graduation level, in some Universities of Odisha English has been made an optional subject at some stage. This is contrary to the age-old practice in Odisha where English has been taught as a compulsory subject at all levels-Primary, Secondary, Higher Secondary and Degree.

At the level of policy, planning and finance governmental help is necessary but too much of interference especially in academic matters ruins the morale of the academic experts who do not find sufficient freedom to formulate the syllabus, devise method of teaching or prepare the texts. Unlike the old system, now-a-days it is the Government which calls the shots in all matters-syllabus designing, question making or system of evaluation thereby making the academia redundant. This is more painful in the state of Odisha where genuine language experts having training in ELT, having a thorough understanding of the process of language learning and teaching and having expertise, insight and enormous experience are very much in short supply. Hence, efforts should be made to make the best use of the best talent available not using the service of the mediocre whose only talent is supine obedience.

The present practice of handpicking the experts should be discontinued; rather there should be an open advertisement in the public domain so as to attract the best brain. The names of the duly selected experts should be notified for information to all concerned so that their suitability, eligibility and conflict of interest, if any, can be publicly known. This will be in keeping with the 5-T Policy of Odisha administration where Transparency is a key element. Not only the selected names of Editors or Reviewers be notified but the draft syllabus and the proposed textbooks in English with its detailed content and the contemplated methodology should also be notified in Council website so as to elicit public response which can be a very good feedback, positive or otherwise. This will be as good as an intimation in advance to the teachers and guardians who are the most important stake holders in academic matters. This exercise can be construed as a positive step to take the

stake holders into confidence. Enlightening feedback or suggestion should be incorporated while criticism, if any, may be understood in right perspective.

Any good work needs time and money. Presently syllabus designing and text book preparation are done very casually while the fact of the matter is it is basically an expert's job and it is a research and development type work. Hence, sufficient time should be given to the chosen experts preferably a period of one year and they should be provided enough logistic support and funds to procure materials, hold seminar or workshop to come out with the best product and result. In the current scenario, it is a part-time work or an overnight affair. In such a situation nothing much can be expected.

Before final publication, the draft textbook should be tried out with low proficiency learners and not so brilliant teachers. As a matter of pilot project, some higher secondary institutions of the tribal dominated districts are chosen for a tryout of the book. The feedback of the students and the teachers can be collected in a scientifically prepared format and analyzed. In order to have an objective assessment, both the book and the answered questionnaire should pass through a third party evaluation.

In a technology driven society no exercise should be insular in nature. As the Higher Secondary students have to face all India entrance examinations, both the English Syllabus and the prepared texts be placed in juxtaposition with its national counterparts like that of ICSE and CBSE and other academically forward states. This Pan Indian approach can be highly beneficial to textbook writers, teachers and learners. The Odia students would not be found lacking or would not be subjected to any complex while pursuing their post plus two careers in any national institution.

Presently Higher Secondary English textbook preparation in Odisha has been a once-in-many-years exercise. This results in bore down and breeds intellectual fatigue with the teachers and the students are also indirectly affected by some uncharitable remarks regarding the 'age' and 'senility' of the textbooks by their family or academic seniors. Hence, the texts should be revised in every three or four years while their efficacy, use by the teachers/learners and setbacks if any be continuously monitored. Hence, instead of asking the editors to wash off their hands after their earmarked task is over, rather their service can be retained by way of making a continual assessment of the impact of these new text books and also providing necessary remedial measures. This can be done through organizing district level seminar cum workshop at regular interval for the Higher Secondary Institutions concerned where in the process of obtaining the feedback of the teachers regarding the texts they can also be imparted training to make the best use of the text by adopting the right methodology. This will make the teachers more responsible and responsive and they will cooperate in a very positive manner without thinking that these texts have been thrust on them from above. This will further engender a sense of involvement in them which will help them to rise to the occasion and will also inspire them to devise their own creative way of teaching the texts the moment they think that they matter. To get honest feedback and to provide more freedom to the teachers along with the Council these seminars can be organized by Non- Government Academic Association.

Text book cannot be judged in isolation. It is one of the vital links in the Great Academic Chain, the others being the language policy of state, the syllabus, the methodology, the testing and the evaluation. All are equally important. One weak link can defeat the inherent noble intention. While the syllabus depends on the language policy, the texts depend on the syllabus as to their content. A good text can yield result when right methodology is adopted in the class and right methodology is adopted when there are good teachers around. However good a text might be or however brilliant a teacher might be everything gets nullified if the questions set in the examinations are shallow, unimaginative and mechanical conducive only to malpractice or rote memory. The question paper suffers the same fate if the evaluation is over liberal and burdened with 'grace mark' which many educationists think as 'disgrace mark'. Hence, there should a close coordination among these 'links' and there should be a nodal agency to oversee their efficacy or otherwise at every step especially the last two-question setting and evaluation. Unfortunately, in Odisha there is no one to monitor these interlinked activities; they are undertaken as if they are independent of each other.

Life nowadays has become very demanding. It makes all sorts of demands on the learners. Lack of employment opportunities and lack of enough resources at the learner's level especially in tribal pockets of Odisha, have driven the students to part-time jobs. Besides, technology has its own pull and attraction. Hence, in keeping with the call of the time, in addition to regular editions, the texts should be made available in E-copy format so that students can make use of them in their own way, in their own 'space', workplace or otherwise. Texts, therefore, should be so prepared that it will lend itself to smooth E-production. Besides, keeping in view the change of public taste, the getup of the text book-its size, cover page, inner pages, paper and printing quality-should also be taken care of lest the students would turn their back on the texts and turn to bazaar notes.

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