

Yakity-Yak (please talk back)

“Is it right to say that I have a severe knowledge of English”

Anonymous Nepalese English Teacher

by Chris Sowton
Global Action Nepal

'It is 2.56 Greenwich Mean Time, on July 20 1969. The door of the moonship is opening. I can see Neil Armstrong standing there. He's wearing a large suit full of air.'

Tikaram Biswakarma is temporarily distracted by a passing yak, braying loudly. He turns back to his teacher.

'Now he's stepping down, putting the first human foot onto the moon.'

Mankind may have made this giant leap 31 years ago – the conquest of space, the defeat of gravity, the triumph of *Homo Sapiens* – but we have yet to make even the smallest of steps in many areas of the world – for Tikaram has never seen a bus before, and yet he is attempting to learn words he has no concept of in a foreign language which he will almost certainly never use. He spends his mornings looking after the family animals (two goats, one ailing buffalo) and his evenings collecting firewood, and like the majority of the 70 or so other 12 year olds in his class he has switched off from the lesson. The problem that Tikaram faces is not of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or even lexis - the bete noire of many Western EFL teachers - but of something far more fundamental: comprehension. He has absolutely no concept of what a moonship, a spacesuit or an astronaut are, let alone what they mean. Here is a boy who lives in a society that has remained largely unchanged (the odd retired Gurkha returning to his village with a television excepted) for hundreds of years. When he returns home in the evening and tells his mother and father that he has been learning about men who fly to the moon in funny-looking aeroplanes, you can begin to understand their reluctance to send Tikaram to school.

Ask any Nepalese English Teacher why English is important and it is a sure-fire guarantee that 99% of them will say 'because it is an international language'. The macro-level importance of English is palpable - especially in a country like Nepal whose economy is driven by tourism (over 50% of GDP comes from this sector). But something far more dangerous is happening within Nepal itself which makes it all the more important that people like Tikaram learn English: English is being turned into the weapon of the elite. The number of English medium private schools are rapidly increasing (the current ratio of government schools to private schools is 3:1); in the Kathmandu valley they are in the majority. Children as young as three or four are taught in English. As a result, private school children become excellent speakers of English whilst their government school cousins are left flailing. In Nepal going to a private school does not simply give you a 'better' education as it does in the West - it gives people opportunities which are unattainable for government school graduates. In short, it elitifies English, turning it into the most precious commodity one can own, and yet at the same time, cannot buy. Of all the students who fail their SLC (School Leaving Certificate, the equivalent of a GCSE), 95% of them fail English, and if you fail one subject, you fail them all. This prevents a potentially brilliant scientist or mathematician from progressing any further in the education system.

So what are the reasons for this staggering anomaly of English-failing students? Nepal is a country with many problems - both political and economic. In developmental terms, a third behemoth presents itself as a major stye to development - geography. Teachers are generally untrained (the majority of ELTs' only teaching qualification is the SLC, schools are in disrepair and morale is low. In response to this grave situation, a few years ago the government drafted in a murder of TEFL experts (I can think of no better collective noun) who set about savaging the textbooks - the only resource which is to be found at the majority of government schools.

When these textbooks were finally introduced, they were delivered late to many villages and without any explanation about them. Instead of help and discussion about the 'new approach' (the books flirt with adopting more 'communicative' methods), the only assistance which was given (and this was only to the lucky schools) were a series of teachers guides. Although many of the ideas expressed were very useful and helpful to the teachers, it required an fairly high standard of English to understand them - an unlikely eventuality when most English teachers would fail their SLC English exam were they to take it again now.

The reason for the late (or non) delivery of the textbooks can be understood when considered in terms of Nepal's geographical diversity. Upon visiting Nepal, you are likely to be besieged by a multitude of facts relating to this: In the space of just 150 km Nepal changes from arid plains to High Himalaya, it has the highest mountain and lake in the world (as well as the deepest gorge) and if you were to flatten the country, it would be the same size as America. When all this is considered, you can begin to appreciate how difficult it is to move things anywhere and penetrate into the remote areas.

But this isn't and cannot be the only reason - although the remoteness is a problem, it is not insurmountable. The real nub of the problem is a Kathmandu-centric approach from the government and INGOs. Wherever possible, avoidance of field trips involving walking, carrying, no electricity, bars or proper toilets is the norm. Yet for a fully-integrated development programme, it is precisely to these areas that we must go. In many cases there is almost an arrogant disregard for 'the provinces although the vast majority of the Nepalese people live in such rural areas (about 80% of the country in fact). And yet to look at the textbooks you would think the inverse was true. The writers of the textbooks (a mixture of Westerners and Western-educated Nepalis) seem to have respectively never set foot outside the diplomatic enclave or forgotten their roots. The books represent this view to an almost laughable extreme.

The majority of reading comprehensions are poor pastiches of Western stories - 'The three little pigs', 'the Big Kindly Giant (sic)' and 'Rapunzel' (I have not yet met a Nepali who can pronounce this name correctly) - even though Nepal has a wealth of folk tales itself. The 12 year-old children of the landlocked Himalayan kingdom have such high-frequency vocabulary as 'submarines', 'squid', 'aqualungs' and 'black swallows' (?) at their fingertips. An exercise explaining instructions gives an exposition for using a photocopying machine - not quite what you would call an 'accessible text' in one of the poorest and least technically advanced countries in Asia. It is not only in terms of content that the books fail but also in structure. 'Communication' exercises simply involve copying; grammar is randomly thrown in and poorly explained; vocabulary is idly littered and is in no discernable pattern. In short, the books are badly thought through and the execution is even worse. I could go on and on with lists of examples, but I shall let this last example speak for itself:

'I was in the Star disco in town...a bloke came up and started talking to me...I really liked him.'

There are infinitely more tea-shops than discos in Nepal, and arranged marriages are very much the norm. This shows just how far Tikaram and his friends were from the minds of the writers when these textbooks were written. Unfortunately, this is a symbolic truth throughout the system.

'One rupee. One pen. One school book'.

Tikaram, like the rest of the class, has broken ranks and descended upon a party of trekking 'bideshi' (foreigners) who are passing their school. The trekkers dutifully pay up, a cheap price for appeasing their conscience, and walk on. The teacher has followed their example and is now sitting in the staffroom reading a newspaper.

The dependency culture manifests itself throughout the system. Just as Tikaram expects from Westerners, so does the teacher. Large organisations and the government pay handsome allowances to teachers in order to entice them to come to training. This makes a commodity of training, linking it with solely with financial reward as opposed to becoming a better teacher. In one district there is now an expectancy of not only free training but of free trainers (the running

kind) after one organisation gave away cast-off Reeboks and Nikes as a sweetener for people to attend. This kind of mentality is identical to the one which punishes a child by making him read a book, causing the child to conclude (quite naturally) that reading is bad - the result of wrongdoing.

The greatest damage that one country can inflict upon another country is to enslave it. Historically this has manifested itself through an imperial power robbing their colony blind until there was nothing left, and then promptly leaving. Nowadays the former imperial powers are, in a fashion, slowly repaying the debt (even though the combined total of 'third world debt is significantly less than the amount that was taken during occupation) through programmes and pet projects which rarely, if ever, meet the needs of the vast majority of the country. The only elephants in Nepal which are not in danger are the white ones.

Take the example of a North American NGO who built a library in a remote village. The building was solid enough and seemed fairly well run; it was popular and the shelves were covered with a fair square acreage of books. However, on further investigation, it transpired that this library was the perfect example of the Stalinist theory of development which is so commonplace in Nepal - build it big, swanky and impressive looking, take nice photos for your end of year report, but don't actually think too much about what is inside it - because inside it, as I discovered, were yards and yards of books of little or no relevance to anyone living in a Nepali village. The catalogue read like a list of remainders from a cold war junkie - *Sino-US relations 1959 ; 1972, What is Carterism?* and *a history of Russian Collectivization* being some of the choice titles. These were not books which were accessible or usable by the members of this library; they were the flotsam from the last day of a university book sale. The most commonly read item in this library was the daily edition of the Kathmandu Post (usually about three weeks out of date).

Another, even more extreme, example of this kind of 'development' is demonstrated by one large organisation's construction of a very swanky library and resource centre in the diplomatic enclave of Kathmandu. Here, if you can afford the annual membership fee of 500 rupees (or 6% of the average annual per capita income) then you can access thousands of TEFL & library books, the internet, and make use of the air-conditioned training rooms. It is truly an isle of serenity and academe amid the hustle and bustle of one of Asia's busiest cities; but it is in the hustle and bustle that real life goes on - and where real change can be made. The library is only really available and accessible to the elite of Kathmandu schools (and indeed, this is the target group of their work). It is the private sector who can afford membership and whose teachers already understand basic TEFL techniques. The large sum of money spent on this ivory tower could have been ploughed into rural areas to give training to those who have none, rather than giving BAs to develop into MAs and beyond. In terms of language, syllogistically and literally, money and power, the inevitable outcome of this is the rich becoming richer and the poor remaining static and a class system being created by the abuse of language. This is not taking the situation to an extreme - Imperial India (and in many ways, present-day India) corresponds exactly to this situation.

Tikaram has been failed time and time again by those who are pertaining to help him. The mantra 'too much aid, too little development' is cited again and again, and yet nobody actually seems to do anything about it. If we are truly to change anything in this floundering education system, then a change of attitude is needed across the board. Those involved in the development of the system have a mandate to help all those under its care, not just the few who are in the right place at the right time. There is no point in building a beautiful new school if the English teachers can't speak English and the Maths teachers can't add up. This is not meant to sound disrespectful - it is a common state of affairs. In such desperate situations, it is surely human resources which are more important than physical ones.

In order to make this happen, a much more grass-roots focused approach needs to be adopted. Training, however well executed, is worthless without implementation. It is pointless giving training without seeing if EFL ideas actually begin to replace the traditional 'lecture' method which is the overwhelming norm in Nepalese government schools. There is a need, if you will, to concept check at a macro level - not simply to ask if they understand, but to find out what they have understood.

When, and only when, the Nepalese space programme is well underway and the likes of Tikaram are planting the Nepalese flag on the moon, will the majority of students in Nepalese schools understand the concept of space. Until that point, let us give them the biggest chance we can, and that means realising the limits of the system and working within those parameters - not handing out one rupee notes and school pens. Let us educate those who have no education, who without education would otherwise never be heard, rather than pander to the vociferous few. The fat eagles are circling over the carrion of the education system, and we must prevent them from landing at all costs.