

The Bangladesh Choice of Text-Books



We commented a few days ago on the Government's decision to extend the teaching of English by two extra years and said that the effectiveness of the measure would depend on the quality of text-books and the competence of teachers. Enthusiasm by itself will solve no problems, especially uninformed enthusiasm. On the contrary, excessive zeal without a sense of academic proportion is likely to ruin well-meant reforms.

An example of this has since we wrote come our way and should be of interest to educationists at all levels as an illustration of the reasons why the present generation of pupils fails to benefit from what they are taught in school. We have been shown a word-book titled My Picture Word Book prescribed for Class-I in certain schools, that is, for children who are about five or six years of age. It consists of nothing but a series of words with their meanings given in Bangali along with pictures illustrating the objects defined by the words. In other words, it is a kind of children's dictionary. We understand that the pupils are expected to memorise the words and learn their meanings as a way of expanding their vocabulary in English. So far so good.

A good beginning, it is agreed, in language learning is a good vocabulary. But the moment one turns over the pages of this word-book, one is appalled to realize that children who can scarcely express conceptual abstractions in their own mother tongue are expected by the author to memorise and assimilate words which they could not by any stretch of the imagination really absorb. Perhaps the author is not at fault at all. He has provided a list of words, divided into classes, which a learner should gradually master. How could he possibly anticipate that it would be imposed on infants aged 5 or 6?

But imagine a child of this age being required to understand in the very second lesson such things as "maternal uncle", "maternal aunt", "father-in-law", "bridegroom" and so on. More horrors follow. The child is expected to learn lungs, "shoulder", "boiled rice", "pulse", "fried rice", "hotch potch", in the next few lessons. In the lesson on Diseases, he must master diarrhoea, phthisis, typhoid, dysentery, measles, and asthma. We refrain from quoting other examples.

Those who prescribed this book have completely overlooked the basic fact that mastery of any kind of vocabulary requires of the learner, adult or child, a perfect understanding of the concepts underlying the words. It is theoretically possible to persuade a child to learn by rote a word like phthisis, but could any child of five or six understand what it implies? Ordinary arts graduates find scientific terms beyond their comprehension, not because the terms themselves are impossible to memorise, but because without an understanding of the concepts behind them they would be of no service to any one. Each science or craft has a jargon of its own, which can usefully be introduced only to those whose familiarity with the science or craft concerned can be taken for granted.

We are afraid that text-book writers, school teachers, and the Text-Book Board are alike impervious to what is one of the essential principles in education; that the material prescribed for any group must be suited to its mental age. This fault is noticeable in text-books in most subjects, English not being an exception at all. Pupils react by failing to respond to what is beyond their grasp, and unimaginative teachers fail them in examinations without taking care to probe the reasons for their inability to cope with their lessons. The result is waste, frustration, and much avoidable misery on the individual level and a persistent deterioration in academic standards on the national level.

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