SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY ON RONGMEI

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ABSTRACT

Second language learning can be addressed from the various points of view. Learning a second language means that we learn grammars, sounds and other linguistic system of a particular language. Learning also includes the proper usage of those elements in proper context. Language learning have various feeding discipline which includes Psychology, Sociology among others discipline Linguistics is obviously one of the important discipline which are require for the process of language learning. This paper attempts to describe the factors responsible for Bengali learning by the Rongmei community of Barak Valley, Assam, India. The paper also highlights the effects of language learning on Rongmei in the light of synchronic approaches.

KEYWORDS: Barak Valley, Language acquisition, Language learning, Attitude, Motivation, Practice

INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam is comprised of three physical divisions, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the Hill range. Barak Valley consists of three districts, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Cachar is the homeland of different ethnic tribes and races, and one such tribe is Rongmei. There are more than 10 different tribal languages spoken in Cachar but most of them are endangered and identified with minority communities. One such community with its own embryonic language is Rongmei. The study is mainly based on Cachar and Hailakandi Districts of Barak Valley, Assam. In the present study main focus is given on the Rongmei community living in Cachar District.

Second language is something that one would learn after one’s mother tongue which is not dominant in that region. Second language learning is not a uniform and predictable phenomenon. It is a result of many factors pertaining to the learner on the one hand and the learning situation on the other. It is not chronologically ordered. It does not imply that second language always should come in second order. It may be in third, forth and so on. It is a question of where the learner learned the second language whether by going to the country where that language is natively spoken or not and also on how, whether by going to the school, institution etc. which is the formal learning situation. It is an informal, if the learner learns it in natural way i.e., in a social environment. The present paper will discuss factors responsible for second language learning by the Rongmei speakers.

THE LANGUAGE AND THE PEOPLE

Who are the Rongmeis

The Rongmeis of Barak Valley are one of the plains tribe of Assam inhabitant. They are in fact a part of the greatest Naga-Bodo section under the Assam Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese speech family (Grierson, G.A., 1903. Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. II). In Assam the Rongmeis are mainly concentrated on North Cachar Hill (Dima hasao) and in the Barak Valley. Rongmei is the name of the people as well the community who speak the language. British called them ‘Kacha Naga’ and Lushai called them ‘Milong’
Debajit Deb

**Cause Danger to or Extinction**

(K.S. Singh, 1994: 173). The alternate spelling of Rongmei is Ruangmei adopted by Rongmei Literature Society of Assam (2003). The primary occupation of Rongmei is agriculture. Since they are living in the plains, they are settle cultivators. Besides rice they also cultivate crops like cotton, mustered, sugarcanes, sweet potatoes and vegetables. Their traditional subsidiary occupations are piggery and cattle rearing. The Rongmei are non-vegetarians. They eat meat and fish in addition to vegetables and pulses. Their staple food is rice. Rice beer is indispensable on all ceremonies and drinking of rice beer called ‘Zau’ in Rongmei and is not prohibited.

Gaan Ngai is one of the greatest and joyous festivals of Rongmei society celebrated in the winter between December and January every year. Rongmei Nagas are known for making wonderful woolen cloths and utilitarian items. The Naga shawl is justly reputed all over India.

**Who are the Bengalis**

Bengalis are the inhabitants of the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. They are also scattered in Bangladesh, UK, USA and many other countries of the world. The Bengali language is endowed with rich literary heritage. Bengali is an eastern Indo-Aryan language. It uses its own script called Bangla script. It is the official language of Barak Valley, Assam. Most of the people in this region speak Bengali. Bengali is written from left to right and top to bottom, in the same manner as English. Bengali and its closely related sister languages are Assamese, Oriya, Hindi etc. Rice and fish are traditional Bengali staple diet, leading to a famous saying in Bengali as, *machhey bhaate bangali*, that may be translated as "fish and rice make a Bengali”.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Second language acquisition entails an even stronger dominance and functional specialization. Throughout the Barak Valley today Bengali is the predominantly spoken as a second language by most of the tribes. It is because that Bengalis are the more in number and most of the shopkeeper, businessman hardly know tribal languages. Even in hospital, dispensary, office everybody speaks Bengali. This language became a lingua franca of this region.

**A COMMON OR A LINK LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATION**

As a result of it most of the tribal people acquired Bengali as a second language after their native language. The main significance of this study is to highlight the factors helped Rongmei Naga community to learn Bengali as a second language.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**


Imphal 4) Deb Debajit. "Bilingualism and Language Maintenance in Barak Valley, Assam -A Case Study on Rongmei". Language in India. Volume 12: 1 January 2012 ISSN 1930-2940. Neither of these above mentioned works clearly did not emphasize on Second language learning is concerned. Hence the proposed study is essential to analysis second language learning factors.
LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The present study is limited to Barak Valley, Assam only. Rongmei is a large community and mainly concentrated in the three states of North Eastern India viz., Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. To cover those area and to know their linguistic scenario demands further research. These areas will be the focus of my future investigation.

METHODOLOGY

For the present study the data have been collected during my field work on 22nd -27th June, 2012 and 6th -18th August 2012, from the Rongmei community, living in Cachar, Lakhipur of Binakandi Rongmei Naga Punji, Kaguailuang (Phatokbazzar) Silchar, Sabaspur (Gongguilong) and Hailakandi (Pantiluang) Rongmei Naga Punji. All the data have been cross checked with the other speakers of same variety. People from the different age groups including both the sexes were surveyed for this study. The questionnaire elicited data on their attitude, motivation, practice and so on were asked to the informants. Both structure and unstructured interview method was followed.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION VS LANGUAGE LEARNING

In many cases, the decision to use the term ‘Second Language Learning’ or Bilingual First Language Acquisition’ It it is a matter of personal preference (Klein:1985). I will use the term ‘Second Language Learning’ in this paper for my convenient. Rongmei people have learned Bengali both in an informal (in a social environment) as well as formal (in the school environment) way. Different authors have shown different opinion about language acquisition and language learning. According to my opinion second language is not acquired but it is learned. Acquisition generally takes place in the first language learning (mother tongue). For example every child acquires his/her mother tongue before the age of puberty3. A child acquires his/her mother tongue through a subconscious process during which they are unaware of grammatical rules. They get a feel for what is and what isn’t correct.

But in language learning rules and grammar are taught. Learning can also take place when a minority community comes under the influence of majority community. Society influences much to adopt new language. Same situation can be seen in case of Rongmei Naga community. Where all the elders and younger have learned the Bengali due to its constant influence. In the same time young children have been guided the rules and grammar of Bengali in the school. This helped them to learn Bengali. It requires lot of practice. Sometimes reinforcement also helps to learn second language.

FACTORS

Sequential language attainment or second language gaining is learning a second language after a first language or native language is already formed. I observed that when a Rongmei child who speaks Rongmei other than Bengali goes to school for the first time and have an easier time learning a second language. A second language can be learned in a various ways. Wolfgang Klein (1985) mentioned two ways of second language learning i) Spontaneous learning ii) guided learning.

3. One’s native language.

4. In humans, puberty occurs at the onset of adolescence, between the ages of about 11 and 14 in girls and 13 and 16 in boys.

Spontaneous Learning

Klein mentioned that ‘the term ‘spontaneous learning’ is used to denote the acquisition of second language learning in every day communication, in a natural fashion, free from syntactic guidance’ A prototypical case is that of a
Rongmei community living in Barak Valley. When this tribe has migrated in the plain land of Barak Valley, had zero knowledge of the local dialect. In later period of time this community manages to learn through their sporadic and unsystematic social intercourse. Since Bengali is the link language and spoken extensively in this region. So in order to communicate with non-Rongmei, in market, in office this dialect is required. As a result, Rongmei people started to communicate with Bengali with some broken words and sentences. For example: /mar kə'am ni/ which means /mar kə'ibe/ ‘I will beat you’. Gradually in everyday communication this spontaneous error in learning made them realize the correct construction of a sentence which results, a good bilingual. Of course this process took many years.

**Guided Language Learning**

Guided language learning is characterized as an attempt to domesticate the natural process of spontaneous learning. Any language is guided by some factors, as for instance the scope and kind of linguistic data available to the learner. The term ‘guided’ refers here to learning that is open to systematic and intentional influence. Typically, this takes the form of regular language instruction in schools, institutions etc. Guided learning influence can be seen among the Rongmei people.

In Cachar and Hailakandi District most of the schools are Bengali medium school, there medium of instruction is Bengali. Rongmei children are bound to read in Bengali medium schools since their language is not taught in the school. As a result of this they learn the rules of Bengali grammar, vocabulary etc in the school environment. This guided rule of Bengali grammar helps them to learn Bengali as a second language.

**MOTIVATION**

According to Mcdougall (1908) who defined ‘an inherited or innate psychological disposition to perceive, and pay attention to, object of a certain class…and act in regard to [them] in a particular manner, or, at least or to experience impulse of such action.’ Maslow (1954) proposed that human motivation has a hierarchical structure which he called ‘hierarchical needs’.

Keeping in view of all these definitions, it can be concluded that motivation is an internal, psycho-psychological conditions of human beings which creates much desires in him/her to do some activity which continues till he/she acquires his/her goal. Learner’s motivation, needs and incentives have always had a central place in second language learning. There are two kinds of motivation, namely, i) integrative motivation and ii) instrumental motivation. Rongmei community was motivated by themselves to learn Bengali and this desire continues till they achieve their goal.

The integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are the key factors which incessantly helping the Rongmei to learn Bengali. Integrative motivation, occurs when the learners wishes to identify with the culture of the second language group. Instrumental motivation, occurs when learners goal is functional, e.g., to get a job or pass an examination and so on. Gardner and Lambert (1972) conducted a case study in Canada in Montreal. They conducted a case study on students who were learning French as a second language. Their study shows that integrative motivated learners are in a better position to learn the French than instrumental.

When I conducted my survey on Kaguailuang, Silchar, some students said that they wanted to be potential member of Bengali community which was an integrative motivation so they learned in much in better way. And some students reported that they learned to get job, and to obtain good marks in exam, which was an instrumental motivation. I concluded my study with a conclusion that, in their case both integrative and instrumental motivations are helpful factors for second language learning.
ATTITUDE

Eveyik (1999: 21) in her MA thesis agrees with most scholars on the definition of ‘attitude’ that it is the state of readiness to respond to a situation and an inclination to behave in a consistent manner toward an object. A typical mentalist definition of attitudes given by Williams (1947:21): “Attitude is considered as an internal state aroused by stimulation of some type and which may mediate the organism’s subsequent response.” In order to learn a second language better we need attitude. Attitude and motivation both are interrelated with each other. Attitude can be studied in three ways as per second language learning is concerned. There are:

5. Serving to incite to action or stimulus.

Attitude of the Learner

Attitude of the learner means learner should have positive attitude towards the language. If the second language learners have the negative attitude on second language then learning will not take place. Along with the attitude there should have proper motivation of the second language learners. Lambert and Gardner (1972) made a study on American Mexican woman learned English better than male. It is because they are having a positive attitude towards the language and positive attitude laid them success in learning English. My research (2012, August) shows that Rongmei male learners of Bengali are having more positive attitude than female learner. It will be wrong to say that women do not have positive attitude. It is true that they too have the same attitude but their exposure in the society is less as a result of this, men are better bilingual in Bengali than women.

Attitude of the Target Community

Attitude of the target community means the attitude towards the second language learner. If the second language learner tries to pronounce the word native like then target community should regard the learner favorably. This means that the success of the learner depends on the target community. In the same year (2012), Bengali people were interviewed regarding what they feel about the Rongmei learning Bengali. Bengali people positively respond that they feel happy and they have no problem to understand their pronunciation. Of course their tone is different but their pronunciation is understandable. This positive attitude of the target community helps the Rongmei community to adopt the second language very favorably.

Attitude of the Learner Community

Attitude of the learner community means what the learner’s community thinks about the second language of the learner. A study was done in England by Bourhis, Gales and Lambert (1975) where French Canadian learning English but they were not supported by their community people. These people are having negative attitude towards the English. Thy also stared to regard the French Canadian people who were learning English are pro-Britishers. As a result, they were not supporting and helping those Canadian French people. So because of negative feeling or attitude of French society French Canadian could not learn the language properly. Most of the time success is influenced by the social and political compulsion.

The case of Rongmei community is different when survey was made (2012). I observed that Rongmei people are encouraged by their society. Respondents were asked a set of questions regarding attitude towards the Bengali language, what the informants feel on the use and their attitude towards the Bengali language in Barak Valley. The Rongmei tribe present positive attitude towards Bengali. It seems that society does not have any problem to use Bengali outside their home domain. It is because Bengali is contact language in the entire area of Barak Valley. Every community uses Bengali
language to interact with the other community. Rongmei community also uses Bengali, for the purpose of interaction in 
bazaar, bank, office, hospital, and shops they use Bengali, because most of the local people outside their villages are 
Bengali and they hardly know Rongmei. Moreover they think that if they learn Bengali no one would deceive them. As a 
result, they keep positive attitude on Bengali language. Such a positive outlook towards Bengali enables the Rongmei 
community to be successful in Bengali-speaking surroundings.

PRACTICE

It is central to all kinds of learning without practice no one can be a perfect learner. The study of a language is like 
other forms of learning in that it’s heavily depends on practice. It is not difficult to learn a new language in any stage but 
requires lots of practice. In learning a language, there is thousands of change to be acquired and that is why practice 
extending over long periods is essential in order to maintain words and patterns readily available for use. If a student does 
not practice often enough, reinforcement fades, and he or she is likely to forget what was learned. Rongmei community 
learns Bengali is a result of long practice. It is true that they were positive and their practice took more than hundred years. 
How much practice is required depends upon the nature of the activity, and upon each individual. Some people improve on 
a particular activity faster than others where practice acts very significantly. In second language learning practice is needed 
to think up the correct categorization of utterance so that they can be smoothly executed.

EFFECTS

Learning a language is an art. Learning a second or foreign language takes time and dedication, we should have a 
clear idea about a second language. Learning a language can help us to know the other culture, food habit, life style etc. 
But in the same time we must aware of its consequences. Let us examine its consequences in context of Rongmei society.

The first effect can be seen in vocabulary, means borrowing. Rongmei has incorporated a good number of Indo- 
Aryan loan words particularly from the Bengali. Since then the Rongmei has been continuing to incorporate Bengali loan 
words in different fields such as words relating to kinship term, name of animals, name of vegetables, natural objects, 
household items, socio-political terms, trade and commerce etc. to fulfill their communication gaps.

6. Use thing composed or invented by others.

**Borrowed Kingship Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source (Bengali)</th>
<th>Rongmei</th>
<th>English Gloss</th>
<th>Phonological Changes</th>
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</table>
| `gadha` > `gadda` | ‘ass’ | The voiced aspirated alveolar stop `/dʱ/` becomes the voiced unaspirated alveolar stop `/d/`. `/dʱ>` `/d`.
| `borop` > `borop` | ‘ice’ | The voiceless aspirated bilabial stop `/pʱ/` becomes the voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop `/p/`. `/pʱ>` `/p`.
| `kakrul` > `kakron` | ‘cucurbitaceous’ | The alveolar lateral `/l/` becomes the alveolar nasal `/n/`. `/l>` `/n`.
| `saban` > `sabun` | ‘soap’ | The short low central unrounded vowel `/a/` becomes the high back rounded vowel `/u/`. `/a>` `/u`.

It should be mentioned here that before adopting Hinduism, Rongmei was a pure or unmixed language which 
utilized its native resource to coin new words for new ideas and objects. But when this community came under the
influence of Bengali community those borrowed words replaced their original words. As a result they lost those native words for goods. It is the result of modernization which influenced them to learn second language.

India is a land of amalgamation of culture and religion. Every culture influences another mostly dominant influence the less dominant one. As a result cultural borrowing is very frequent. Cultural borrowing is taking social behaviors, customs and ideas from another culture. This acculturation is found in Rongmei society. When Rongmei people have migrated in the plain land of Barak valley they were animist. They were nature worshiper. They believed in the religion of their ancestors that is called Paupaichap means the religion of grandfather and grandmother. But later due to the influence of Hinduism many more Rongmei converted to Hinduism. As a result of this they started to worship different god and goddesses. They worship Bisnu considering him as a one of the supreme God of heaven. Besides Hinduism, Christianity was also embraced by large number of people.

Another instance is script. Rongmei does not have their script, like Bengali, Hindi Oriya etc. Script is one of the most significant writing systems in the world. A language writing system is represented by its script. A writing system as a set of observable or perceptible signs used to stand for units of language in a methodical way. Rongmei community has adopted Bangla script in the beginning to represent their writing system. Recently they have adopted Roman script.

A sign of separation from their home land (Tamenglong Valley, Manipur) can be noticed. Rongmei from Manipur Valley regards that Rongmei community living in plain land of Barak Valley are no longer pure. They think their language is mixed with Bengali and other neighboring languages. As result maintenance of home or ties with home land are not maintained.

CONCLUSIONS

Chamber (1999) highlighted that a learner with more positive attitude, can make his language learning with more easiness. Similarly, Gardner and Lambert,(1972) gave more emphasis on the same “Positive Attitude” in the same way in context of learning of languages. It is true that Rongmei people have learned Bengali because of their positive attitude and prolonged practice. But at the same time they are quiet conscious about their own languages. They speak their language in their home domains and motivate their children to maintain every pros and cons of the language, which is by nature, considered to be an asset of the ancestors. Finally, it may be well-furnished that although there are some sorts of lexical borrowings, cultural borrowings are occurred to be more prevalent in the language modification. But this acculturation may not affect and can be revitalized if they continue to maintain and show love, respect and dedication to their language.
Bring back to life or to restore vitality.

Map of Barak Valley

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