



English Education: Challenges and Remedies

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ABSTRACT

The English language has lived in this country ever since the days of the East India Company. But, the problems of teaching-learning English have continued to pose further problems. First, it is a colonial legacy. Next, it is a post-colonial necessity. Hence, it is both a blessing and a burden. This work is an effort to understand the birth of English in India, how it was treated by policy makers and what is the present state of affairs.

KEYWORDS

Foreign, comprehensive, Fluency, policies, Linguists, Imperialism, Communication.

Introduction:

No doubt English was a foreign language, when it touched the shores of India. There was no problem. It became a ruling language. Then also there was no problem. When it was dressed up in the cloak of the Associate Official Language, problems galore cropped up. Now we are reaping the harvests. Perhaps our future generations will also taste the remnant as well as fresh fruits. The basic problem is that we do not have a consistent and comprehensive language policy with reference to English.

It is usually taken for granted that educational policies and problems belong to the field of academicians and therefore, the headache also belongs to them. True, the educational policy-making is better left to the experts in the field and masters in the discipline, but the problems occur from the fact that the policies are framed by a handful and consequences are suffered by the masses. Only the wearers know where the shoe pinches, unfortunately the policy makers have been always makers only and never wearers.

I
Regarding the question of culture and education, English still plays a major role in Indian psyche. A person having moderate competence in the English language is still considered to be cultured and well educated in the common consciousness. A little bit of verbal fluency and a manageable power of pen, on the other hand pass the mark of culture and education. A man with standard skill of language therefore enjoys a high social reverence. In such a scenario, English is learnt more as compulsion than out of genuine interest.

II
This being the situation in post-independent India, the other side of the coin is the necessity and unavoidability of English language. The first constitution of India endorsed English as a language for official purposes and a second language.

In the 21st century, where things have moved a lot forward in a world moving fast towards the concept of a global village, the necessity of English is felt in a larger way, much larger than that of the period of colonial rule. Under the British rule, it was the ruler's language- it has now become the world's language. The shift is a major one, and felt deeply in a world dominated by information and technology. We may have resistance against it but the truth is that we are not in a position to do away with it.

Moreover, English has become today the Language of Power all over the world undeniably. Turning deaf, dumb or blind to this reality would be no more than putting forward a plea for

obstinate ignorance. It is the language of power in both senses: a powerful language and the language of power holders. Necessarily, therefore, English has become the international language of communication, and neither the linguists nor the state men can really deny it. The need is growingly felt, as is evident from the mushroom growth of the English medium schools at every corner, though most of them are trash in the truest sense of the term.

The point to be noted is that this should not be considered a threat or a latent challenge against the vernacular or mother tongue. No language in the world can really take away the natural gift of our mother tongue – it is as indispensable as our breath. The most logical and scientific policy of specifying the vernacular as the medium of specifying the vernacular as the medium of instruction adopted by some of the state government including Gujarat should have nothing against the realization of the necessity of English. English learning may happily continue even without any duress and as a parallel stream of language learning. The whole point of the debate generates from the issue of age. when should we begin learning it? The simple answer is – along with the mother tongue in an institute, where we enter the field of formal education. This is so, because even if we talk about our mother tongue, it has also to be learnt formally, and in an institutional way. Undeniably, acquisition of knowledge is better done through the vernacular medium, but then up to a certain level. Where the question of higher education or higher knowledge is concerned, one may have to move to another language for convenience and linguistic range. At this point, the capability, range, expressibility, vocabulary and certain other points have to be borne in mind.

III
In the field of higher education, another feature has been a teething problem for the learners. In most of the Indian universities, studying English has been equated with studying English literature. Language studies still plays a second fiddle, and business or workable English- the kind of English we use now and then- has no rule to play at all. Students from the discipline are, therefore, not much of a success in their professional fields other than that of the higher academia. It is painful to contemplate even of those who become teachers in schools where they have to do very little with what they learnt in colleges and universities; on the other hand, they have to deal with a lot of language teaching which they learnt very little at UG and PG level. The obvious consequence is a lower level of performance.

Another peculiar symptom of our times is: although we complain the every other minute about our learners' apprehen-

sion of the English language, an indianised hotchpotch of Hindi and English has become very common among the average masses. Thus, English in the academia still evokes fear, paradoxically and interestingly enough, expressions like Ye Dil Mange More, Thanda Thanda CoolCool, clear Hai, Ha Yes Abhi, are on everybody's lips. The great responsibility of language teaching, it appears, has been left to the media-putting language learning amidst the anarchy of market economy.

IV

Where do we stand then? The only answer to these problems is, of course, a sensible and judicious policy-framing and syllabus-making, keeping an eye on the learners and their specific needs and problems. But this is also too a simplistic an answer. The best we can do is to harp on certain areas of practical importance and identify the redline symptoms of the learners' problems.

Firstly, though English is still a foreign language to a large section of masses outside the sphere of education, it is not so – in its essential sense – for those in and around education, especially higher education. In all senses, Sanskrit is more foreign to us than English. This may hurt our classicist and ancestral ego, but it is truth. English has already indianised itself a lot and going to do so a lot more in the future. This must become part of our consciousness.

Secondly, English should be taught as a 'second' language, but not with 'secondary' importance. In a globalised world as ours, remaining insular to English would mean to turn our back to reality. If it is the language of the imperialists, we have to fight imperialism, not whatever these nations and their people have.

Thirdly, in the field of higher education, bifurcation of the English syllabus has become a necessity. There should be a clear and open option for the learners: those who are interested to specialize themselves in literature and culture studies are happily welcome to do so; but there should be a parallel course of studying the English language for those who want to learn it for practical purposes, who want to 'use' it as a 'usable language'.

Last but not the least, like any other language learning, learning English should begin at an age when the learner is at the highest of his/her capacity for language acquisition, not at an age when he/she is compelled to learn it but can acquire the skill only at a lower rate, and with much trouble.

This is not a comprehensive treatise but an attempt to highlight some areas of confusion and struggle to find out a ray of hope.

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