

The Teaching of English in India ; Society and Change

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Introduction : English is taught in India very extensively as a compulsory second language or a third language in all schools and most colleges. The status of the language and the emphasis on its teaching learning varies from region to region. In some areas it is accorded the status of an official language and its teaching begins in the first year of school. In some others it is accorded the status of a second language and teaching begins in the fifth or sixth year of schooling. In spite of the variations in the status accorded to English the fact remains that all students completing their school education have had at least five years of English learning.

Considering the fact that India has such a vast infrastructure for teaching English to so many learners and the fact that quite a large number of institutions like Central Institute of English, the Regional Institutes of English and the National Council of Educational Research and Training are constantly engaged in the process of experimenting with methods and materials of teaching English, it is natural to expect that the proficiency level of English amongst educated Indians would be high. It is a fact that India had been exposed to English for two hundred years during the British Raj and it is the medium of instruction in most institutions of higher and specialized education. Besides, English is used extensively by the administrators of the Central Government and the higher echelons of the Judiciary.

However, in spite of these and a substantial amount of creative literature in English, the proficiency levels in English are poor. A majority of the learners coming out of the schools and colleges possess communicative skills in English.

The Spread of English : No one knows for certain how English spread in India. It is generally assumed that the first contact with the English came through the travellers and traders in the fifteenth and sixteenth

century. It spread more rapidly as the British established themselves as the paramount power during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Majumdar 1971:403). However, the spread of English in India is quite different from that of America. Firstly, the number of native-English-speaking-migrants was quite small. Secondly, when the English came to India they found a well developed and established multilingual and multicultural community. Besides, as Schuchardt observes the English who came to India made no attempt to learn the local vernaculars. Rather, to communicate with the local people they used "Dubhashes" or local Indians who had picked up enough English to act as interpreters, between the British and Indian traders. It is through these native interpreters that the bulk of the untranslated native expressions, which gave a distinct character to the speech of Englishmen who came to India, was introduced into the English language (Gilbert (Ed.) 1980:53).

History suggest that at the early stage there was no formal or systematic attempt to teach English to Indians. In fact in the multilingual and multicultural Indian subcontinent at this time there was no tradition for teaching second language at all. Though some attempts were made by Englishmen to break the language barrier, it was much easier for Indians to pick up English through informal contacts as different languages were spoken in different regions (Datta 1991:63).

The Process of Indianization of English :

The informal contact way of the spread of English naturally gave way to the development of several varieties of English in course of time, in different parts of the country. Among these are Boxwallah English of Upper India, Butler English of Bombay and Babu English of Bengal. These varieties have all the qualities of a pidgin like limited vocabulary and elimination of many grammatical devices of number and gender (Mehrotra 1982; Widdowson 1979).

The features common to all varieties of English which developed in India however, is markedly reflected in the vocabulary and pronunciation. Since English came to play a functional role in the Indian context it had to expand and adopt from the existing linguistic environment. Peculiarities of pronunciations like inability to distinguish between /b/and /v/ in Bengal, between /e/ and /æ/in Gujarat or rounding of vowels in Orissa are but a few examples of this. Vocabulary items like ryot, jodhpurs, hartal and maidan came to be incorporated within the language.

One can say that a process of hybridization came in English, where new words and expressions by combining units of two different languages began to be used. In fact the language contact situation of this time only encouraged this and expression like Lathi-charge and Sepoy detachments came to be used more and more.

Along with the process of hybridization, there has also come about a peculiar situation of code-mixing and code-switching even in the Indian languages. Studies conducted by Datta (1984), Gumprez (1982), Kumar (1982) Kachru (1978) have shown that not only do Indians mix words from their own language while speaking English, but they do often use English words while speaking in their own tongues. This probably has come about from the contact of English and the mother-tongue in a very intense way. English and the vernacular languages have come to signify two parts of the existence of most educated Indians. So whereas English has adopted words from the Indian languages similarly the Indian languages have also adopted words from English.

Status of English during the British Raj:

Once the British became the administrators of India, the status of English underwent a sea change. From being a foreign language used by a handful of traders for the purpose of trade it became the language of the rulers. Though still considered as a foreign language it became the language of administration. Indians were quick to see the advantages of learning English and they started learning it.

Even patriotic Indians started realizing the advantages the knowledge of English offered and advocated its learning. The fact remains that in the three Presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, English came to be learnt with lot of enthusiasm as a window to the world of knowledge science, technology and philosophy. It was this generation of Educated Indians of the nineteenth century who brought about the Indian Renaissance.

Early Methods of Teaching English:

The British Government's Education Policy did not suggest any methodology for teaching English in India. The attempts of the Missionaries in teaching English were haphazard and nothing much is known about the methods adopted by them. However, in most of the vernacular medium of schools the Grammar-Translation Method was adopted (Ganguly 1986:62). This was favoured by the Indian teachers because most of them had poor

abilities in the spoken form of the language and this approach saved them from speaking English in their classes, they preferred to make their learners learn by rote the grammatical patterns of English. It was also preferred as it did not demand any teaching aids and large groups could be handled by a single teacher. This approach made the learners strong in grammar but neglected to develop the communicational skills in English (Mackey 1965).

The early parts of twentieth century saw the influence of Palmer, Sweet and Jespersen on English teaching in India. The result was the development of what we call Direct Method. In India its adoption saw the emphasis on suppression of mother tongue (Ghosh). Most probably the British teachers in Indian schools found this approach to be most suitable because it made it possible for them to teach in India without the necessity of having to learn the Indian languages. This method appeared to work in the English medium schools, where what was being learnt in the English class was not the only source for gaining proficiency in English. English also got learnt incidentally in the other classes as well. Thus learners in the English medium schools became proficient communications in the language as a result of their exposure to English during their entire school day.

In vernacular medium schools however, this approach proved to be a disastrous one. The over emphasis on unilingual presentation and the incidental presentation of grammar confused both the teachers and learners alike. With the result no language learning seemed to take place. In fact it proved to be disastrous in most Indian schools. This also saw the beginning of the growth of two categories of learners one proficient in English as a result of attending English medium schools and another poor communications in English as a result of not being exposed to the communicative use of the language.

The Role and Status of English in Independent India:

The consequence of about two hundred years of British rule in India is that English has been firmly transplanted into Indian soils. During British Raj its status had been raised to that of an Official Language. It had also become the medium of instruction in a great number of schools and colleges, and still remains the predominant medium of instruction for Higher Education. Amongst the educated Indians, it has become the means of communication across language barriers. In fact, as has been pointed out, the English language attained status in India that had been

attained by no other language before. During the Muslim rule Persian had acquired the status of the official language but had failed to attain the status of a Common language. For the first time in Indian history English, under the British rule, provided the medium of communication across the vast subcontinent (Das Gupta 1970:40)

After the independence the controversy rose as to what is to be done with this legacy of the British Raj. The constituent Assembly, that came into existence in December 1946, after much controversy decided that the official language of the Union should be Hindi in Deva Nagri Script. For a period of fifteen years from the effective date of the adoption of the Constitution, English would in addition to Hindi. This compromise has instead of helping solve the language issue has further complicated the matter. As Das Gupta (1970) points out the framers of the Constitution while choosing a single official language, did not define the role and status of an official language in a multilingual and multiethnic situation as in India. The result has been that we have been debating in the intellectual circles about the language policy and have coined terms like 'national language', 'official language' and 'common language' but have made no distinctions between them. As a result most of us overlook the fact that there are restrictions in the use of English in India. Raja Rao (1971) sums this dilemma up in the following words, "It is the language of our intellectual life-like Sanskrit and Persian before-but not of our emotional make-up".

This observation sums up the dilemma regarding the status of English in India. In spite of having served as an official language and common language English has not and cannot ever attain the status of national language in India. Das Gupta (1970:44) puts it more explicitly:

Even among Indians who had accepted English education, the use of English was and still is - confined to certain behavioural situations... The center of the individuals life comprising home, family, and kindred, rarely saw the English code for communication.

English therefore, was reserved for official, academic and other relatively cosmopolitan behavioural situations.

In this context we would perhaps be more realistic in our approach if we try to define the status of English from a Psycho-linguistic, socio-linguistic and pedagogic point of view. From this we could say that the status of English is somewhere in between a Second

language and a foreign language. Something more than a foreign language because of varied communicative functions performed by English and due to the fact that it is a language which has been Indianized to a considerable extent over the years of its existence in India. Less than a second language because it is the mother tongue of an insignificant minority of the population and it is also not the language for the expression of our emotions.

The functional role of English as the 'Language of intellect' and as an 'intra-national' and 'international' link language is very much appreciated, particularly by the educated middle class. It seems unlikely that any other vernacular language is going to replace English to perform this role. This is easily noticeable by the eagerness of the people to educate their words in English medium schools and by the concern expressed by the people at the falling standards of English.

The Social Aspects of English Teaching-Learning:

The Social dilemma of Indian Society, particularly the educated middle class is obvious from the preceeding discussion. On one hand pressures from many state Governments has seen the lowering of the status and emphasis on the teaching of English. The nationalistic leaders have often condemned the continuation of English for such a long time and have often advocated its total abolition. This is true in most states of northern India. For the students coming from vernacular medium schools and from semi-urban and rural areas, where the teaching of English is often haphazard, find the slogans attractive as English for them is a difficult language to gain proficiency in. However, most of these students face problems when they attempt to study in the institutions of higher education particularly specialized and technical education where the medium of instruction is invariably English.

It is thus observed that proficiency in English has become a sort of parameter to decide who will go in for higher education and who will not. Surveys conducted amongst learners of English in different parts of the country show that almost all learners have a strong motivation for learning English, but the system of language teaching makes it difficult for them to do so and repeated failures totally demotivate them. With the result even in rural and semi-urban areas, the moneyed send their children to the so called English medium schools in the hope that competence in English would give them the better opportunities of life.

Pedagogic Aspect of the Problem:

Since the fifties structural approach has been adopted in India for teaching English officially. The approach bases itself on the premise that once the structures are introduced in a graded manner and these are drilled through constant pattern practice drill, the learners would be able to use the language in a communicative situation. With this intention specialized materials were created keeping in mind the structures known by the learners and the structure being introduced in that particular lesson. A strict vocabulary control was also attempted at. However, the approach did not produce the desired results because in the classroom nothing changed and it continued to be a 'teacher-textbook-taught' situation. The teacher read the lesson, paraphrased it, sometimes in the mother tongue, explained the grammatical items and some time dictated notes. The learner became a passive participant in the process of acquiring language skills. Wherever he got an environment to be exposed to the use of English he picked it up as in English medium schools and wherever he did not learn no English. Quite naturally learners from vernacular medium school cannot use English.

Some attempts have been made to attempt remedial measures. Widdowson (1968) has recommended introduction of communicative language teaching for ESP courses in science and technology and social sciences. Prabhu (1979) made an attempt to use communicative language teaching through problem solving tasks to evolve an indigenous methodology. Loyola College made an attempt to use the behaviouristic principles of Skinner to teach language (Xavier et. al. 1989) however most of these are still at the level of experimentation and are yet to make their impact felt in a big way.

Conclusion:

It is an accepted fact that English would continue to play an important functional role as the language of intra and inter regional communication particularly in the field of higher education and intellectual exchange. However, unless serious attempts are made to ensure that all learners leaving school have sufficient proficiency in English to pursue higher education, knowledge of English would become the key to success or failure in life. Which is perhaps not very desirable.

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