

De-coding English 'Language' Teaching In India

Dishari Chattaraj

Research Scholar, Centre for Linguistics, JNU, New Delhi

E-mail: disharij@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

English Language Teaching (ELT) in India is more than two centuries old and still, our students falter with the language. The aim of the present article is to unravel this enigma and in doing so it adopts a deductive approach and critiques our language policy in education with an aim to locate the crux of the problem. The article throws light on how our language policy in education is evidently monolingual under the façade of trilingualism. It goes on to establish that the position of English in the curriculum is that of a 'subject' and not a 'language' and questions the standards the policy aims to achieve. Providing an instance of the convergent pedagogy model from an analogous postcolonial society, it offers a solution to the problem at hand with a view to ending the plight of the learners.

Keywords: *ELT; Language Policy; Convergent Pedagogy.*

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) in India began as early as 1780s and English was conceived, as Sinha (1978, p. 80) puts it, the “sine qua non for the scholars, the job seekers and the affluent in the society.” And nothing much has changed in all these 235 years; English still remains the *sine qua non* for higher studies, jobs and its use is restricted to the educated and privileged few; but now everyone wants to ‘learn’ the language because it is, as Annamalai (1992, p. 39) puts it, a “profitable commodity”. However, among the vast majority of the people only “. . . 30% are able to, to varying degrees, speak English” (Aula, 2014). This figure is

pretty ironic, given the fact English has been taught for more than 200 years now and also because it is taught from the primary level in government public schools in India. The article focuses on government public schools because, among the total 23 crore students enrolled in various schools in India (Dhawan, 2013), only a privileged 2 crore study in English medium schools (Mukherjee, 2012) and also because the language policy in education is mostly applicable only to government schools.

The aim of this article is to unravel this irony and in doing so it goes on to show how the term ‘language’ in English ‘Language’ Teaching is misleading in the

Indian context. A language is primarily a mode of communication and the requisite of mastering a language is to possess all the four skills, namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988). Thus, acquisition of English would also mean the acquisition of all the four skills. Sadly, that does not happen with our students as English is not taught as a 'language' to the pupils but rather as a 'subject', and this tragic outcome is a result of our language policy in education. This article, therefore, critiques our language policy in education in order to locate the problem and find the solution.

Literature Review

There has been a lot of research in the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT) on the problems. The fault has generally been found to be with teachers, teaching programmes, teaching materials (Prashar 2011, p.164), classroom practices, teaching methodologies (Kapoor 1992, p.80), and so on. However, very few pieces of work in the literature mention, to some extent, without dwelling much deeper, about the treatment of English as a subject.

Rajan (1995), though talks about "subjecting English", she does not focus on school children and is more interested in the 'literature' and 'language' bifurcation English is subjected to in India. She suggests English classes to be replaced with just reading classes in universities as she believes this will lead

to both insightful "critical thinking" and "language skills". The gap in her research is that she assumes the students have achieved a certain higher "level". This is entirely hypothetical because there is no consistent level and also because the general 'level' of English of an average classroom in an average college is poor (Benzigar, 2013). Shah (1992) talks about the treatment of English as a "content Subject" in schools. However, he just states the problem, makes no reference to the language policy in education, and provides no solutions.

India's Language Policy in Education

"India's language policy, known as the "three language formula", has the effect of covering 90% of the Indian population. Surprisingly, the Indian model of language planning has proven successful and points to a possible solution for multilingual countries..." (Gadeli, 1999, p.18). The quote gives an impressive, or rather a utopian, picture of the Indian Educational Policy. A country which houses more or less 122 languages (Census, 2001) belonging to five different language families, i.e. Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Semito-Hamitic, and their innumerable dialectal varieties might be of immense interest from a linguist's point of view, but from a language policy maker's point of view, it is nothing less than what Gadeli states as "a nightmare" (1999, p.18). However, the three-language formula introduced more than half a century ago in 1968 sounds impressive and inclusive at the same time. The

formula suggested by the committee is mentioned below:

- **1st language:** Mother tongue or regional language.
- **2nd language:** The official language of the Union or the associate official language of the Union so long as it exists.
- **3rd language:** A modern Indian or foreign language not covered under (1) and (2) and other than that used as the medium of instruction (MOE, 1966, p.192, as cited in Meganathan, 2010, p.5).

Many researches in language acquisition have proved that the mother tongue serves best the purpose of medium of instruction for child learners; the evidence for this can be found in an UNESCO document (Bushman & Trudell, 2008, p.5), "The research evidence today clearly shows that using the learners' mother tongue is crucial to effective learning" and all efforts are made to apply this theory in the field of language teaching. The policy makers emphasize the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction. There are instances that even when the medium of instruction is theoretically a standard language, Hindi or Bangla for instance, in practice some dialect of the language is used as medium of instruction. So, technically as well as practically, the language policy is achieving what it desires; there is no problem here. The problem, however, lies

in the changing socio-cultural dimension and the forces of globalization: "the prevalence of globalization and democratic ideals demonstrates that students must be proficient in international and regional languages to gain access to wider society and to participate meaningfully in their world" (Bushman & Trudell, 2008, p.6).

The language policy in education, which is now more than half a century old, is good only in theory. The chief propagators of this three-language formula like Pattanayak et al (1971) were of the opinion that once implemented in schools, the formula will also enable universities to replace English with regional languages, more specifically Sanskrit and Hindi. However, the elite political class back then admitted the importance of English, as Gandhi (1921) said (as quoted in Zamam, 1984, p.8), "For a few of us therefore the knowledge of English is necessary", English thus was a language of the elite and they desired to keep it so. However, a drastic change in the socio-economic level, the liberalization of Indian economy in 1991, has brought forth many multinational companies which have been providing the youth, especially the English speaking ones, with employment. Thus, there is growing demand for English education and English is no longer a foreign language; it has been Indianized into a recognized standard variety called Indian English. Though the education policy provides for English education, there are gaps prevalent in it which must be bridged.

The Pedagogical Status of English in India

The fifty-year-old policy is not appropriately equipped to meet the interests and needs of the common people. The common people want to learn English as the language of empowerment, but the policy pays hardly any heed to this demand, at least on a practical level. Though theoretically pupils are taught three languages, the second and third languages are hardly of any use. Mastery in a language is possible only when more and more inputs are available in the target language. This is one of the main reasons why pupils from English medium background perform significantly better in English than their regional medium counterparts. English remains a 'subject' for the regional medium pupils and never acquires the status of a language which can be used for communication. So, what is the ultimate use of this celebrated language policy if it fails to impart the desired objective of achieving language proficiency?

The language policy in education has reduced the stature of English to just another subject in the curriculum like history or physics. Even in an English language classroom the instructions are not given in English. The teaching of English begins with the alphabet, which goes against the logical sequence of language acquisition that has been proved through research, as Rivers (1968:51) pointed out: Listening à Speaking à Reading à Writing. English is treated just like arithmetic and the A, B, C, Ds are equated

with 1, 2, 3, 4s and just as mathematical formulas are learnt by heart, and so are English sentences. Thus, on the surface the language policy looks like a trilingual one but a reality check reveals that it is not even bilingual in nature as "more than 90% of schools at the primary and upper primary stages teach through the children's mother tongue" (NCERT 2007, as cited in Meganathan 2010, p.20). So, clearly the education policy is a monolingual one behind the façade of a trilingual education policy.

The Convergent Pedagogy Model

A clear case of bilingualism in education can be found in Peru, where the model of *Pédagogie convergente* (convergent pedagogy) is used. Much like in India, pupils start learning to read and write in their first language before learning their second language, and by the time they reach 5th or 6th grade the time allocated for learning languages is divided equally between 1st and 2nd languages. However, by the end of primary schooling both the languages are used as medium of instruction. This stage is hardly ever achieved in the Indian government schooling system. The 2nd language retains the position of a 'subject' and as a result the school do not qualify to be bilingual schools, "Bilingual education is most likely to succeed if it consists of more than a change in the language of instruction" (Bushman & Trudell, 2008, p.13). The English medium private schools are more close to the model of bilingual education as they start teaching

English from the primary level itself. Initially, though instructions are given in the regional language, gradually the teachers move towards an all-English instruction mode. This enables the pupils to become proficient bilinguals as the 5 hours/day schooling gives them enough inputs for the acquisition of English and for the rest of the day their interaction with their parents and friends in their mother tongue makes them proficient in their L1, too.

The Predicament of English in India

Several researchers like Mamta (2006) and Suresh (2006) made comparative studies about the standard of written English between students of government schools and those of private English medium schools, revealing a wide gap between the two groups. Mamta (2006, p.217) refers to the deplorable condition of English produced by students of government schools and adds that “some radical changes in the present education system, English language teaching in particular, should be necessary.” Such strong evidence about the sinking standards of English in government regional medium schools raises the obvious question of what the language policy actually strives to achieve, what standard of English it expects its subjects to produce.

A brief look might be taken at the National Achievement Survey (NAS) (NCERT, 2012, p.2) report, as it claims to conduct a “Health Check’to the education system by analyzing achievement based

on a range of background factors (school, home, teachers).” The English language test was conducted in two classes, class 3 and class 8 across the country. In class 3, LSR skills were tested and in class 8 reading and comprehending skills were tested. What is shocking to note is that no tests were conducted for judging the writing skills or communication skills. The inference that can be drawn here is that our language policy does not expect pupils to possess either writing ability or communicative ability even after studying English for 5 years in school. These students fail quite naturally when they go for higher studies, in producing error-free English and the innumerable studies in Error Analysis in the Indian context provide ample evidence for it.

Conclusion

The language policy needs to be amended. Changes in language teaching methodology will do little good as long as English retains the position of a ‘subject’ in the schooling system in India. No improvisations in the field of language teaching can make any significant difference for the betterment of the students’ proficiency in English. Nothing drastic needs to be done to make amends. Introduction of English from the very first year of schooling along with using it as a ‘language’ will do wonders. The present requisite, however, is the treatment of English as a ‘language’ rather than as a ‘subject’. Even trained teachers and professionally developed teaching materials would be

of little help if they were entrapped in the limitations of time, i.e. one period/day slot. If literature can be a “tool” (Kaur, 2011) in language education so can be the social sciences as well as the physical and natural sciences. The formula for language acquisition is very simple: the more the input, the better the output.

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