

# ELT in India: Need for a Standardized Test that Reflects LSRW Skills



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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper proposes to explore the solutions for revamping ELT against the backdrop of the MNCs and the shrinking of the world into a global village. Proficiency in English language is seen as a means of empowerment and, therefore, right from schools a number of them have initiated activity/practical/project-based teaching. However, when it comes to employability skills, the predominant learners, i.e. rural /vernacular medium students, are still left out as disadvantaged students. The paper proposes that in such a context, at the level of higher education, introducing changes at the policy level which would make it mandatory for students of all undergraduate programs to take the exam set by an All India English Language Testing Authority, which is conducted by the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad.*

## **History and Policies regarding ELT in India**

The history of the English language and its position in this multilingual country of ours is indeed both peculiar and interesting. The English language was originally introduced with a vested interest of aiding the administration. Sir Charles Wood's epoch-making **Dispatch of 1854** led to the enthronement of English as the medium of higher education.

However, the introduction and implementation of English as a medium of education has been intermittently opposed for multiple reasons by both politicians and freedom fighters including Mahatma Gandhi. On several occasions Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the mother tongue as

the medium of instruction. He said: "The babe takes its first lesson from its mother. I, therefore, regard it as a sin against the motherland to inflict upon her children a tongue other than their mother's for their mental development." Again, "The medium of instruction should be altered at once and at any cost, the provincial languages being given their rightful place. I would prefer temporary chaos in higher education to the criminal waste that is daily accumulating."

Unfortunately, the chaos continues today. After Independence and the subsequent linguistic reorganization of the states, many states began to adopt the three-language formula. There were a number of court cases filed in different states across India and arguments regarding the status of English were divergent.

The Gokak Committee appointed by the Government of India to report on the study of English in India made a number of interesting observations. The All India Council for Education recommended the adoption of the Three-Language Formula (TLF) in September 1956. This was a major attempt to arrive at a language policy for education. In 1968, the National Policy on Education (NPE) laid special focus on the study of English and other international languages. The NPE insisted that India must not only keep pace with scientific and technological knowledge, but also should contribute to it significantly. It was for this purpose that the study of English required to be strengthened. The institutions which helped in strengthening the national system of education are the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), the Medical Council of India (MCI) and the Dental Council of India (DCI).

### **The Contemporary Scene**

For instance, in the State of Andhra Pradesh where there are about 2,800 secondary schools, the medium of instruction and examination, in all but a handful of exclusive schools in the bigger towns and cities, is the regional language. English is, no doubt, still being studied in all the schools, but as a compulsory second language. English is relegated to a period of 40-50 minutes every day. This implies a virtual elimination of English from schools which follow the regional languages as the medium of instruction. As a result, students

who have studied in the regional medium of instruction up to their high school, plus two and even graduation levels in some cases are the worst affected when it comes to their employability skills, particularly their communication skills in English.

### **Importance of English in India Today**

At this juncture, it needs be reiterated that the rate of success of students in the examinations in the regional language medium is encouraging up to a certain level. However, we are living in an era that Mahatma Gandhi did not anticipate when he said, “Who can calculate the immeasurable loss sustained by the nation owing to thousands of its young men having been obliged to waste years in mastering a foreign language and its medium, of which in their daily life they have the least use and in learning which they had to neglect their own mother tongue and their own literature?”

This is an age of tremendous and unanticipated changes ushered in by developments in science and technology, especially revolutions in the field of information technology. Students with a strong grounding in the English language have an undoubted edge over their regional medium counterparts in employment or in higher studies. Education today cannot be divorced from employment. With a few exceptions, all of us would agree that education today is intertwined with employment.

The continuation of English as an official language along with Hindi (even in the Hindi

speaking states) is tantamount to a tacit acknowledgement that the English language is 'window to the world', 'link language' and a 'language of library'. In 2008, the Government of Andhra Pradesh came up with a proposal to introduce CBSE pattern in its schools. The proposal backfired for a number of reasons. Ironically, even today, some of those who argue in favour of the vernacular medium may not be sending their own wards to those schools. Again on 7th November, 2012, *The Hindu* (School Edition, Hyderabad) carried a report titled "It will soon be Telugu versus English in Schools."

While the importance of the mother tongue cannot be undermined, the victims are the hapless students who feel demoralized, diffident and finally deprived of employment opportunities, especially after their graduation from professional courses. Teachers of the English fraternity have the onus on them to wave their magic wand and make their students as proficient as possible in the limited time allotted to them for the purpose. Unfortunately, however, frequent changes in the language policy have led to widely heterogeneous groups of learners in the classrooms in terms of their English language competency. This can be frustrating for teachers and students alike.

In order to meet the rising need for candidates with English language proficiency, variants of general ELT have paved the way for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and so on. In all these

variants, the purpose involved is self-evident. While attempts have been made to make English language teaching more rigorous and skill-oriented, there is a large gap between students' marks in English projected in their certificates and their actual proficiency in English. This is particularly so for students from the underprivileged and disadvantaged classes, government and rural schools. It also needs to be mentioned that students from English medium schools are not necessarily proficient in all the four skills of the language, nor do they possess a vast repertoire of vocabulary.

In many situations where emphasis in their plus two level is only on the core subjects, what has been learnt in their high school is forgotten and is undone when they go to higher education institutions. Sometimes a student from a disadvantaged group has excellent grip over the grammar of English but is unable to prove himself in the activities related to speaking, and vice versa. The differences exist in various degrees and skills. The teacher at the undergraduate level has to help the students gain confidence by developing their oral fluency in English and also help them improve their writing skills. They have the onus of imparting/improving their students' soft skills. Most universities have designed curricula which show a giant leap taken towards this goal.

#### **Need for a standardized test**

Nevertheless, a point of concern is the lack of a standardized test that truly assesses

the students' proficiency in English. While the West has IELTS, BEC and TOEFL for admission to their universities, in India we have no such tests that provide a frame of reference for assessing a student's proficiency in the English language.

The English and Foreign Languages University (Hyderabad) has designed a test under the All India English Language Testing Authority (AIELTA). The test is very different from the traditional memory-based language tests that are prevalent in the country. It is a general proficiency test in English and is not based on or linked to any prescribed school or college syllabus. The aim of this three-hour test is to determine how well an individual can use English for communicative purposes – it assesses a candidate's proficiency in reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary.

This is a middle-level test and is meant to judge a candidate's ability to use English for routine purposes at the workplace and for study purposes in post-secondary education. It should serve to distinguish between excellent, adequate and average users of English in the contexts of language use mentioned above. The ability to use English as defined for this test includes accurate and contextually appropriate use of language.

We are all painfully aware of the fact that at the intermediate or secondary school level, students can easily score 80s and 90s. The syllabus and the assessment pattern aim to bail out students from the regional

media. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a new policy to be evolved where taking a skill-based test such as the one developed by AIELTA must become mandatory for all graduates.

All undergraduate programs are for a three- or four-year period. While universities should be given the freedom to design and implement their ELT programs as they deem suitable and required, students should be under obligation to take these proficiency tests at as many levels as possible. The modalities are understandably difficult, but not impossible to overcome.

The need of the hour is to conduct these tests more frequently than once in a year as it appears to be given now, and publicize it and also make it mandatory. Language teachers or some centres may be allowed to help students prepare for such exams. Familiarizing students with the pattern of the test is essential, as the results of the 2012 show that out of 57 students who took the test at the Hyderabad centre not one of them could get an A grade in Part 1 and only three got an A grade in Part 2.

### **Conclusion**

The Government of India and EFLU can explore ways of evolving a certificate that will validate the marks according to their proficiency levels. The University should make vigorous efforts to publicize this test and conduct it more frequently. Experts can be drawn from various fields to look into the modalities of making this a possibility where standards will be maintained, and the quality of the tests is retained. It is

unfortunate that many of our students, even after years of education in the English medium, require coaching to appear for TOEFL and IELTS which are mandatory for admission to foreign universities. What is more tragic is the fact even after nearly seventy years of Independence, we have not developed a standard test of English in India which could at least serve a similar purpose or be valid within the country.

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## **Consultancy Services by ELTAI**

ELTAI is happy to announce its consultancy in the use of technological tools for the teaching and learning of communication skills in English. The consultancy will specifically provide resource persons for conducting teacher training workshops on virtual learning, covering primarily the use of the following tools: Virtual Classroom; Wiki; Google Drive; Google and Yahoo Groups; Blogging; Social Networking; Mobile Learning; Flipped Classroom.

ELTAI resource persons may also conduct workshops on using these tools and technological resources for developing specific language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as teaching grammar interactively.

Institutions which require consultancy in these areas may write to Prof. S. Rajagopalan at [elta\\_iindia@yahoo.co.in](mailto:elta_iindia@yahoo.co.in) with CC to Dr. P. N. Ramani at [ramanipn@gmail.com](mailto:ramanipn@gmail.com).