

Colonial and Post-Colonial Praxis of Teaching and Learning English in India

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ABSTRACT

English, once consisting of a few dialects spoken by the inhabitants of a small island, later emerged as a widespread language snowballing throughout the globe and has now attained the status of 'link language', 'global language' or the means of international communication and is increasingly becoming ubiquitous. The present article aims at highlighting this trajectory in the growth of English in India. The article discusses the factors responsible for such an expansion and acceptance of English language in the Indian context along with a brief account of the obstacles it faced during its spread. Furthermore, the article provides an account of the existing situation of the integration of English language teaching in the curriculum and of using English as the medium of instruction.

Keywords: English in India; English as a second language; language debate; language teaching and learning.

The Arrival of English Language in India: How and When

Many feel humiliated if they cannot speak English. Other people might think you are dumb (Scrase & Scrase 2009). This perception is the outcome of diffusion and a constant spread throughout the British colonies for centuries in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Today, English has become an international language; it has more than 1.5 billion speakers all over the world.

In India, English has attained the status of a second language and is regarded as an

essential medium of communication in the modern world. English, as in most of the other parts of the world, came to India as a result of colonization. The British arrived in India in the early 1600s as traders and businessmen (Riddick, 2006). At first, the East India Company gained its foothold in the coasts of Surat and Goa. Soon, many other cities were under the hold of the company. Gradually, the company started widening its horizons by participating in the political as well as administrative matters of India. As a result, by 1765, the East India Company expanded to such an extent that

it was controlling most parts of the country, which marked the beginning of the British colonial rule in India which then continued till 1947. The colonial rule resulted in the familiarisation of Indian citizens with the English language. Prior to the British occupation, there was no uniform educational system in India (Thomas, 1891). The matter of education was regarded as personal to the citizens and was not the responsibility of the state (Dash, 2003).

After the establishment of the company, English was the language used by the British rulers. At first, it was not considered important to educate the Indian masses. Later, a need was felt among the Company owners to have a class of 'Brown Englishmen' to fill the lower cadres of the Company's administration and strengthen their political authority which would help the British to establish, consolidate and continue their rule over India (Kochhar, 1982). Thus, the seed of English language started to germinate in the land of India.

Factors Responsible for the Arrival of the English Language in India

In the beginning, the British did not want to familiarise Indians with European education. They felt that this move would enable Indians to challenge the alien rule, as was the case with America. But later, it was a political necessity to promote western education in India.

As mentioned above, the British felt that indigenous education was not competent enough for creating an educated class of workers. Thus, an intense need was felt to

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familiarise Indians with the English language. The major purposes of introducing English in India can be summed up as follows:

- To teach the children of soldiers: Schools were set up at Tanjore and Marwar by the Christian missionary Reverend Swartz.
- To have elite workers: It was also used for preparing an English speaking workforce for the British government. For smooth administration, the Company was in need of Indians who could work for them as clerks.
- To impart Western learning: For them, western education would civilize and modernize Indians which would help them in their advancement. As Lord Macaulay (1835) stated, "...a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Chand, 2007).

English was the language of the rulers, which resulted in its imposition on the subjects. Later, the efforts made by the missionaries, natives and the government led to further strengthening the locus of English in India.

Language Debate on Medium and Content of Education

At this juncture, it is important to elaborate the rifts among the colonizers themselves. Dakin states that the introduction of a new educational system required to deal with two basic questions concerning "...the choice of medium and eventually the content of

education as well” (1968:07). This was the reason for the division of the two groups – Anglicists and Orientalists. The Anglicists favoured western language and science over the native. Lord Macaulay held that the English language was the “best worth knowing” and would be the “most useful to our native subjects.” He credited Western literature with “intrinsic superiority” (Nururllah & Naik, 1943). He suggested, “I have never found one amongst them (Orientalists) who would deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” Orientalists were led by H. T. Prinsep. He viewed Macaulay’s minutes to be “hasty and indiscreet”. They favoured the use of the earlier languages (Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian). Many of the English educated Indians also demanded the mother tongue to be the medium of instruction (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014).

This difference led to the widening of the gap between primary and secondary education. Primary education in the native language came as a result of Mahatma Gandhi’s influence, which attacked the question on extent, content and the medium of a British education. He found support in the views opposite to those of Macaulay in his Minutes.

Sir Wood’s Despatch (1834) and also the Calcutta University Commission (1919) recognized the importance of the mother tongue, suggesting that the medium of instruction for the lower levels of education to be the vernacular and for the higher levels to be English. But this led to an

inconsistency in the educational system. The Wood Abbot Report recommended an alternative: to use simplified English in order to keep the flow of education through the medium of English. The Sargent Report (1944) recommended the native language to be the medium of instruction at all levels of education (Chand, 2007). Such arguments and counter-arguments led to a constant conflict regarding the medium and content of education in the pre-independence phase.

English in the Post-Colonial Period

India is the third largest English speaking country in the world after the UK and the USA. In India, English enjoys the status of a second language and the Constitution gives it the position of the ‘Associate Official Language’. As Kachru states, “after World War I, there was a significant increase in educational institutions, and schools and colleges spread to the interior of India. This naturally helped in spreading bilingualism in India further among the middle and lower classes of Indian society” (Kachru, 1983:23). Today English is seen as a mark of high status and sophistication within the country. It acts as one of the major driving forces for being educated. Thus, it is seen as a tool for social and professional advancement (Sekhar, 2012). Broadly speaking, English serves in bringing *administrative uniformity* within the country. It also acts as a vehicle for *wider communication*.

Being a linguistically and culturally diverse society, India treats the status of English under discrete political, cultural and social

paradigms. Three major concerns arise out of this discussion – the position of English in education, the role of Hindi and English as regional languages, and the uniformity and efficacy of the prototype of English presented to Indian learners. The initial two concerns of language planning rest with the government of India both at state and national levels, although these concerns are not satisfactorily addressed in any of the answers (Kachru, 1986b, as cited in Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014). The principal objective of teaching and learning English in India has been crafted parallel to the need for a link language in a multilingual setting, providing remarkable opportunities, social status, and social mobility.

Perhaps, this trajectory is not realized on easy terms. The teaching and learning of English and the incorporation of English as a medium of instruction in curricula pose a number of challenges. Schools and colleges in rural parts of the country lack exposure to English as a language for teaching and learning, the absence of trained teachers with a command over the language, low standard of teaching materials, and lack of technological aids essential for teaching a foreign language like English. Most importantly, the education system in many parts of India fails to ensure quality education to learners. Thus, there is an imperative need to address these issues regarding the integration of English language in curriculum and teaching-learning models, both at regional and national level.

Conclusion

From the moment the English language came into the Indian subcontinent, it started spreading swiftly. Its arrival was marked by the colonization of the country but its proliferation was due to many other reasons, internal as well as external factors. English was introduced in the name of education but became a means of job opportunities in the British Raj and a window to western learning. “The expansion of English language was not wholly a forced phenomenon. Rather it was the need of the hour...” (Khan, 2009).

In an attempt to realize the efforts in the pre-independence phase, the current situation demands serious endeavours to establish a coherent and inclusive educational system. This would ensure systematic and promising English education as a means to prosperity and advancement.

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