

The Practice of Academic English in Sikkim

Dr Rosy Chamling

ABSTRACT

With a history of both colonial (English) and indigenous educational practices (Monastic), Sikkim's engagement with the English language reveals the state's transition towards modernity. While the principal spoken languages of Sikkim are Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha; English is taught in schools from the primary level as a compulsory subject which apparently makes the students exposed to Academic English from an early stage. Sikkim's language ecology bears witness to a linguistic cleavage between English as an Academic Language and as a Social Language, particularly at the university level. This paper attempts to discuss: (i) How does Academic English fare in the language ecology of Sikkim? (ii) How does one withstand the contradictory pressures of vigorous ethnolinguistic identities as opposed to the linguistic imperialism of the English language in Sikkim?

Keywords: Sikkim, Academic English, Language Ecology, Social Language, Linguistic Imperialism

Introduction

It has been observed that Academic English plays an important role in determining the academic success of students. Although the distinguishing characteristic of Academic English is still fuzzy, attempts are being made to understand the teaching and learning practices of Academic English. In its broadest sense, Academic English refers to the language used in school to help students acquire and use knowledge (Bailey & Heritage 2008; Chamot & O'Malley 1994; Schleppegrell 2004). English language teaching in Sikkim is of fairly recent origin and yet Academic English is no longer an additional language to the language repertoire of students. English is a compulsory medium of instruction in this small state of Sikkim with a population of non-native speakers of the English language. All texts are primarily in English and the students are exposed to the English language through various

social mediums.

In the field of language acquisition where the student's language proficiency is dependent on place, culture and context, I argue that Sikkim's socio-cultural history does impact its English Language Learners (ELL). Language is the medium through which concepts and knowledge are disseminated, social relationships are forged and identities are formed; and when students are exposed to the English language from an early stage, it ceases to be a second language. However, in the case of Sikkim, one can see that there is a linguistic cleavage between the English that is used for basic interpersonal communication skills (Social Language) and the English that is used for higher education or other occupational purposes (Academic English). Zwiers differentiates between the Social Language and Academic English in the following manner: "A conversation with a friend about a

recent sports event would involve much social language, whereas listening to a lecture on globalization would be more academic” (2013; p.20). In the same vein, for Gee, social language refers to how language is used to establish “a socially situated identity and carry out a particular socially situated activity” (2005; p. 20). On the other hand, Academic English is used for concepts associated with academic content with a primary instructional focus. Bailey distinguishes Academic English from Social English on three levels: “the lexical or academic level, the grammatical vocabulary level, and the discourse or organizational level” (2007; p. 3). Thus, one of the first paradigms for thinking about Academic English is to recognize the difference between English as a Social Language and Academic English.

Discussion

The present paper is an attempt to show how the practice of Academic English within the higher academic space is fraught with severe challenges. It is based on the researcher’s personal experience as a college and university teacher in Darjeeling Government College and Central University of Sikkim respectively. Teaching English in these institutions of higher education of the hills, these hill-students¹ fare comparatively better in the English language oral/spoken skills than in writing. The paper focuses on the practice of Academic English in Sikkim’s educational space with a tangential reference to the only relatively young Central University of Sikkim established in 2007. The practice of Academic English in the higher education space of Sikkim is also an area of scrutiny considering how ‘place’ as a category of academic

consideration has never garnered much attention although educational institutions have never been ‘value-free neutral’ spaces. The category of ‘place’ in these academic space(s) has a deep potential for political and cultural engagement inside the classroom through the kind of texts that are being taught and how it is being taught. In his introduction to Paulo Freire’s book *The Politics of Education*, Henry Giroux says:

Education is that terrain where power and politics are given a fundamental expression since it is where meaning, desire, language and values engage and respond to the deeper beliefs about the very nature of what it means to be human, to dream, and to name and struggle for a particular future and way of life. As a referent for change, education represents a form of action that emerges from a joining of the languages of critique and possibility. (1985; p. xiv)

Education is a place where power and politics meet and so this should make both the educators and learners interrogate their own positionality. An academic space should promote critical thinking skills, an act that can help the learners to challenge the homogenised dominant culture and canonical literature. Under such circumstances, any text that is dealt with in these academic spaces should not be detached from the context because writing essentially begins from a context. Context is the situated place from where writing begins; it includes not just the physical environment, but social, cultural, historical, political and even ecological environments. Cummins makes a point that language is inextricably linked with context as “illustrated in the different registers required for success in university English literature courses

¹. Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal are culturally and linguistically contiguous areas.

as compared to success as a stand-up comedian” (2000; p.55). Snows’ research has also noted differences among linguistically diverse children in their use of ‘decontextualized’ (1983) language, proving that the acquisition of Academic English can be quite a linguistic challenge to students coming from diverse backgrounds, where meaning has to be generated through linguistic cues provided by abstract context. Within the institutional circuits of production and consumption, what is being taught, how it is being taught and under what contextual histories, all these are deeply implicated in various forms of exclusion and inclusion that can mirror a particular ideology. Such has been the case with Sikkim where the historical trajectory of education in Sikkim can be divided into the pre-merger and the post-merger period (Dewan 2012).

Education and Sikkimese History: Changing Dynamics

The growth and spread of English education in Sikkim are inextricably related to the forging of modern Sikkim. The mythological origin of the state of Sikkim can be traced to the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty in the 17th century. Phuntsog Namgyal, the great-grandson of Guru Tashi was consecrated as the first king of Sikkim in 1642 with the title of ‘Chogyal’ meaning ‘religious king’. After a long rule of the Namgyal dynasty from the 17th century, Sikkim became the 22nd state of the Indian Union by the 38th Amendment of the Constitution of India on 16th May 1975. In the pre-merger period, this Himalayan kingdom followed the monastic education system which was primarily based on the Lamaist form of Buddhism. Formal education was virtually non-existent during this period. This system of education was meant for the clergymen

and imparted from the monasteries (Waddell 1973). The modern system of education with an emphasis on the English language was first started by the Christian missionaries, particularly during the period from 1880-to 1950. The earliest encounter with the English language perhaps came with the signing of the Treaty of 1861, under which Sikkim became a de-facto protectorate of British India. The indigenous natives saw the arrival of the English language from the reign of the seventh Chogyal Tsugphud Namgyal (1785-1863), which was further strengthened by the Oxford-educated tenth Chogyal Sidkeong Tulku. While the Scottish Missionaries played a major role in developing modern education in the neighbouring hills of West Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century, their constant attempts to make inroads into Sikkim were strongly resisted by the Sikkimese Chogyals. The Chogyals viewed the British evangelical mission of spreading education as a threat to the insular Buddhist tradition of Sikkim by Christianity. However, it was in 1883 that Reverend McFarlane of the Scottish Mission was finally able to establish the first missionary school in Gangtok. This impetus for English education was further strengthened with the appointment of J.C.White as the first British Political Officer appointed by the British Government in Sikkim. White took major steps in consolidating formal education by establishing the Bhutia Boarding School in 1906 and the Nepali Boarding School in 1907. Both these schools were later combined to be called Sir Tashi Namgyal High School in 1925; named after the last Maharaja of Sikkim-Tashi Namgyal. Similarly, the first English imparting school for girls in Sikkim was started by a Christian missionary Mary Scott. It was later taken over by the Sikkim Durbar in 1941

and renamed Paljor Namgyal Senior Secondary School in memory of the Maharaj Kumar Paljor Namgyal who had died young in a fatal accident. Modern education developed at a vigorous pace after the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975.

A place with a strong indigenous cross-current, Sikkim faces a challenge to withstand the “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson 1992; p.47) of English. In its undeniable acceptability as a world language, it is also a language of job opportunities. There is also a high status and respectability attached to the English language. Several English Learning schools or centres have been mushrooming in the capital city of Gangtok which promises to offer a quick fix solution to people keen on learning the language. Thus, the schools in Sikkim follow the central Government of India’s three-language formula as a part of which a student learns English, Hindi and one of the indigenous languages of Sikkim. However, English Language Teaching in Sikkim continues from the schools till the undergraduate study in colleges as a compulsory subject. Most Sikkimese are relatively good speakers of the English Language, possibly because of the following reasons: (a) schooling with teachers being native speakers of English; (b) schooling with teachers being non-native speakers of English but who were themselves products of the Jesuit and missionary schools of the Darjeeling hills; (c) exposure to Anglo-American

ways of living². The language ecology among the schools in Sikkim consists of indigenous languages like Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali for students as one of the optional subjects; the medium of instruction at the school level is English all through.

Nepali being the lingua franca³ of the Sikkimese society can be considered the ‘contact language’ in Sikkim which has a phonological grammatical and lexical similarity with Hindi and also because of the demographic majority of the Nepalese population in Sikkim. The inclusion of English into the existing language ecology of Sikkim has had a far-reaching impact. The use of the English language by most people in Sikkim can result in the disuse of Nepali as the lingua franca. This rapid spread in the use of English comes very close to the phenomenon of expanding circle (Barber, Beal and Shaw 2009) as observed by the programmes of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The TESOL has also observed how multilingualism is at the heart of this rapid spread of the English language within the expanding circle of nations. Einar Haugen defines language ecology as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment: Just as ecology is a “movement for environmental sanitation” (1972; p.329), the ecology of language should be concerned with the cultivation and preservation of languages. It is typically concerned with the status of

². The result of British taking a keen interest in English education and also because of the major influence of the enigmatic American queen Hope Cook, the wife of the twelfth and the last Chogyal of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal who had married Hope Cook in 1963. The American queen controlled education in Sikkim through the establishment of the Youth Study Circle. See Sunanda K. Datta-Ray’s *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* (1984).

³. The status of Nepali as the lingua franca has been established vide Sikkim Official Language Act 1977. Act-5. No. 5/LL/77; dated 25.10.1977; and also through the inclusion of Nepali in the VIII schedule of the Indian constitution.

languages, functions, and attitudes, and ultimately with a “typology of ecological classification, which will tell us something about where the language stands and where it is going in comparison with other languages of the world” (Haugen 1972; p.337).

The ethnography of Sikkimese society also plays an important role in language classification. The language spoken at home/ community (private space) is one of the indigenous languages of Sikkim; while the language used in school (public space) is predominantly English. If Nepali is the social language that is seen used by all and further suggests that these differences should be considered as “differences in the relative frequency of complex grammatical structures, specialized vocabulary, and uncommon language functions” (2007; p.9). sundry, because of the demographic majority of the Nepalese population in Sikkim as already mentioned, English is an aspirational language of the middle class, a language that promises to give them respect and employability. One may consider the disuse of social language (here Nepali) as a deficit view of language. However, Bailey cautions against this tendency “believing that there is something inherent in social language that makes it less sophisticated or less cognitively demanding than the language used in an academic context” (2007; p.9). Concerned over the spread of English and its potential to threaten cultural and linguistic diversity, Phillipson fears the potential dangers of imposition of new ‘mental structures’ through English (1992; p. 166). To

reduce this tyranny of ‘linguistic imperialism’, a healthy language policy that is inclusive of the broader socio-cultural and ethnic considerations should be adopted. Here a healthy language policy would mean a policy that encourages cross-cultural study and literature produced in other languages. The inclusion of English into the existing language ecology of Sikkim thus has had a far-reaching impact on the pedagogical terrain. This pedagogy of language teaching is also enmeshed with economic power relations with English being primarily the language of the dominant elites. It becomes imperative to maintain healthy language ecology so that the lesser-known languages do not have to fight for their survival.

Shifting Paradigms

As opposed to the monocentric approach which conceived of English as one unique variety which fits all, the pluricentric approach is accepting of the different varieties of English. India -----with a British colonial historical past could not have been uninfluenced by the language of the Raj. Sikkim’s neighbouring hills of Darjeeling have been primary summer retreats for these Britishers and several public schools were established by wealthy colonists and Christian missionaries bolstered by the British administration in the late nineteenth century. But behind the evangelical mission was also the nostalgic need to create a space that looked and resembled the schools that existed back home in Britain.

The pluricentric approach was popularised by

⁴. Braj Kachru, a Kashmiri-American scholar initiated the ‘Three Circles’ model in the 1980s to explain the spread of English in various countries through the image of three concentric circles: Inner Circle (countries whose native tongue is English like UK); Outer circle (countries in which English is rooted for historical reasons alongside indigenous languages as in India) and Expanding Circle (countries who learn English for its international usefulness as in China).

Braj Kachru and his school⁴. Post-merger into India, the Sikkim government took up prioritising education by setting up modern schools where the medium of instruction has been English. Sikkim's English learning scenario faces a contradictory pressure of retaining a vigorous ethnolinguistic identity and resisting the strong global homogenizing tendencies through a reckless pursuit of the English language. The reason why Academic English within the higher academic spaces of colleges and university seem to be discouraging is that most learners who join the English Major courses are under the impression that the course is meant to hone their language skills. So, when these learners are subjected to the study of literature and critical theory, there is a paucity of imagination to deal with the rigours of Academic English.

There will now be the need to shift from conversational English to Academic English in their engagement with literary and theoretical intersections. Such a paradigm shift requires not just a critical reader but a critical writer as well. Unfortunately, their language learning at the school level have failed to equip these learners to handle an academic course that demands not just proficiency in conversational skill but critical understanding as well. Academic English is complex because it is a critical specialized writing situation where the skills of thinking and presenting are deployed for a specific readership in mind. It employs certain linguistic strategies to express the relationship between the facts and ideas and demands the learner's fair grasp of the subject from the learner. One can see a gnawing gap between the English content of what is being taught at the school and college level and the university curriculum. One of the major fall-outs of this gap resulting in a low level of academic English has been the

'decontextualized' (Snows 1983) syllabi. Students coming from various ethnolinguistic backgrounds are subjected to an array of World Literature, New Literature, and western theoretical literary paradigms which can be quite daunting. The gap can be filled in by the gradual introduction of these kinds of literature at least from the higher secondary school level and sensitive paradigms can be adopted by the curriculum developers and policymakers.

There is now a need to shift the paradigms of teaching/writing English in Sikkim from the 'diffusion-of-English' paradigm to the 'ecology-of-language' paradigm (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1996; p. 429). As pointed out by educationists, the diffusion-of-English paradigm is characterised by capitalism and linguistic elitism building a hierarchy of languages. It is a syndrome marked by a rush in learning the language (here English) with the sole purpose of gaining a conversational edge. Such learners are trained for bare conversational skills but they are not encouraged to critically think and write which are essentially needed for academic English. Such an approach has led to a sense of 'language deficit' among the learners within the changing context of higher education spaces. On the other hand, the ecology of language involves promoting multilingualism thereby building a linguistic diversity where English is to be one of the languages to be learnt. This ecology-of-English paradigm serves as a threat to the hierarchies of language because it recognizes the need for inter-cultural communication with the knowledge of other languages. It is only in comparison with other languages and their diverse cultures can a learner be taught to think critically and express the same in English. Academic English seems too complex for these learners because of this decontextualized

language. The existing language ecology of a learner in Sikkim is one of the indigenous languages spoken at home like Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali, Limbu, Newari, Kulung, Gurung, Mangar, Sherpa, Tamang and Sunuwar. However, Nepali is spoken in Sikkim by all, irrespective of their ethnic identity, for their day-to-day conversational exchanges. Nepali is also used as an additional official language of the Sikkim State Government. While elementary education in the rest of India is imparted in their familiar mother-tongue children in Sikkim are introduced to the English language from an early stage. However, all schools are multi-lingual as students learn Hindi, English and indigenous language/ mother tongue. By the time the students reach the portals of higher education, the medium of instruction becomes distinctively monolingual which is English. It is at this stage that students grapple with academic English as cognition and knowledge production has to take place in a language that is not their mother tongue. The ethnocentric approach with a focus on local realities can be adopted by the curriculum developers. This new integration approach which is both an acceptance and amalgamation of localization and contextualization can go a long way in improving academic English in Sikkim.

Conclusion

After having suffered the oppression of the rigid early monastic forms of education and with their exposure to world literature through the pursuit of the English language, Sikkim seems to be trudging along the path of transition. The modernization of education in Sikkim involved the inclusion of new texts, contexts and theories which will now have learners negotiating new terrains through Academic English. Academic

writing involving critical thinking draws upon cultural sources and interpreting cultural signs can therefore transform the classroom into a site of discourse. At the same time, ideal language ecology should ensure a happy co-existence of a new language along with other existing languages. Since the learners in Sikkim are introduced to the English language from an early stage alongside the language they may be speaking at home like Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali; there is a sharp cleavage between the languages spoken at home or community and English as practised within the academic spaces. As we have seen how the acquisition of languages is dependent on socio-ethnic factors, learning through the local, socially-situated cultural practice should be more encouraged. When there is a rush to grasp the English language with no inherent connection between language and culture, acquisition of language suffers. The distant referencing, social setting, and complex language make the practice of academic English daunting. As academic content becomes more complex and abstract, language structures also become more challenging. Although Academic English is more cognitively demanding, yet it is a dynamic concept that will continue to be of interest to educators who wish to use the English language within the academic spaces.

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Dr. Rosy Chamling, Associate Professor, Department of English, Sikkim University (a central university), Gangtok, Sikkim.