

Reviewing the Role of English Studies in a Global Cultural and Linguistic Context

Ajeet Singh

Abstract

English Studies and its role are surrounded by unresolved controversies, speculations and expectations from its very beginning as an academic discipline. The phenomenon of Globalization makes it more complex. Due to its colonial legacy and socio-economic changes at present time, English language teaching is being accused of doing away with our cultural and linguistic diversity. English language teaching is perceived as a process of Cultural and Linguistic homogenization that kills our indigenous culture and languages.

Globalization and international status of English language locate English teachers as mediators of both language and culture. In English teaching, differing interpretations, contesting ideologies and struggles between frames for meaning are central to the concerns of globalization. This paper reports on an investigation of English Teachers' perception of their role as mediators between language and culture and how globalization is (re)shaping and (re)defining literature, language, composition and mass media in an expanded set of possible identities, discourses, subjectivities, communities, and modes of interpretation. This paper describes how English teachers can locate themselves between the two extreme positions of cultural homogenization and harmonization by teaching English language and literature through inter-cultural reader response theories of literary interpretation, socio-cultural methods of language-study, and juxtaposed multi-media representations.

English Study: Controversies, Speculations and Expectations

English Studies and its role are surrounded by unresolved controversies, speculations and expectations from its very beginning as an academic discipline. The phenomenon of Globalization makes it more complex. Due to its colonial legacy and socio-economic changes at present time, English Studies is being accused of doing away with our cultural and linguistic diversity. English language teaching is perceived as a process of Cultural and Linguistic homogenization that kills our indigenous culture and languages. On the other hand, English Studies is regarded as a space for promoting intercultural communication and democratic discourse resulting in a process of linguistic and cultural harmonization. In this conflict of defining English by using different terminologies, there arises a more important question of its indispensability, changing socio-cultural realities of the world, linguistic patterns and attitudes at large and the role and responsibility of English teachers facing all these challenges. This paper places in a critical perspective both the English Studies and the role of teachers in the canvass of a large picture of globalized world with its frame of meanings, motives and models.

Globalization and Global *Lingua Franca*

‘Globalization’ is tentatively defined as the interconnectedness of nations at a purely surface level, namely economics. Viewed from the vantage point of the power of socio-cultural parameters, such as race, religion, language and culture, ‘globalization’ is perceived as a narrative of contradictions and incoherence. The process of globalization, if seen as a bid to seep into the house of wisdom of peoples’ culture, has stopped at the threshold of their inner consciousness. Like infinite Oceans on which lines cannot be drawn, the creative potentialities of a people, their language, thought and reality cannot be dissociated. Language, the principle avenue to the totality of a culture can often create intolerance to cultural differences when barriers emerge in the context of cross-cultural communication.

Just a few centuries ago, English was spoken by just five to seven million people on one relatively small Island and the language consisted of dialects spoken by monolinguals. Today, there are more non-native than native users of English, and English has become the linguistic key used for opening borders. It is a global medium with local identities and messages. At present, English dominates functional domains in the widest Register range.

Currently, we witness the development of English as the global *lingua franca*. This is evident in the rising number of people the world over who use English as their first foreign language. English is in the process of taking on the same role as Latin in medieval Europe as a common tool of communication across cultural and national boundaries. However, for the first time in history, we witness the rise of a *lingua franca universalis*: universal in a functional sense, i.e. going beyond the limited (commercial, religious etc.) functions of the past and in the sense of gaining a truly global reach, covering the most remote parts of the world - remote not only geographically, but also linguistically and culturally. The main reason for the spread of English can be found in history: Imperial expansion of European and US power changed the linguistic patterns among millions of people and superimposed English (and some other European tongues) in many parts of the world. When the imperial nations gave up their colonial empires, their languages remained. Today, for the English-speaking countries, English is a commodity that can be exported throughout the world. English-speaking countries have a larger linguistic capital than countries of other languages.

Other Languages Endangered

The world’s linguistic and cultural diversity is endangered by the world-wide spread of English which work to homogenize and standardize. Native languages are in drastic decline. The stark reality is receding status of small non-powerful languages. Many languages are on the brink of extinction. Of the world’s 6800 tongues, half or 50% are predicted to become extinct by the end of this century. In a recent and pioneering survey of the human surface of India, conducted by the Anthropological survey of India, scientists have identified 4599 communities in the country, which speak 325 different languages that belong to twelve distinct language families. Among these 325 spoken languages, 24 have their own scripts and literature. The newspaper reports mention the tremendous diversity and complexity of cultures in the country and stress the strength and continuity of regional identities. Such a complex cultural and linguistic diversity of the country is perceived to be endangered by the spread of English language.

Identity Maintenance

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

Ajeet Singh

Reviewing the Role of English Studies in a Global Cultural and Linguistic Context

10

The difficulty of identity maintenance and the violent tendencies of the dominant language and culture are described here in the colonial context and contrasted with an ideal of inter-cultural openness, understanding and fairness. The intensive spread and promotion of English threatens linguistic diversity. Unfortunately, with the extinction of a language, a unique world-view, culture and source of people's identity also disappear. Aggressive promotion of English threatens the linguistic rights of speakers of other languages.

English and English Values

The term 'English' designates not just the language, which has become the world language for communication, but a certain set of values, a way of life which could be described as 'westernized'. There is no doubt that we cannot do without English in today's world; its importance in the global perspective makes it indispensable as a tool of communication between nations. What is problematic, however is the role English has played and still plays as an ideological apparatus, the ways it works in conjunction with the dominant powers within our society, to create and maintain a hegemony over the diverse cultural formations of the country. Svati Joshi mentions this very precarious state of affairs in her book:

The period after independence has witnessed an increasing proliferation of English and a much greater homogenization of culture, particularly among the urban bourgeoisie, which is further consolidated by the centralizing imperatives of the newly formed nation-state.... This centralization has provided an enormous logic and justification for the continuous and intensified use of English in public discourses.... (Svati Joshi, P. 6)

Another Side of the Coin

But there is another side of the coin that presents a completely different or opposite picture of the same. Rather than a process which leads to uniformity and homogeneity, globalization seems to create new, hybrid forms of culture, language and political organization: the results of global influences meeting local traditions, values and social contexts. Language – humankind's indispensable meaning making tool – can be an instrument of cultural and linguistic oppression. But this 'tool of tools' can also be a vehicle for advancing linguistic human Rights and minority language and culture empowerment. Efforts to protect and promote indigenous languages and cultures with their distinctive diversity in homogenizing times point the way out of the either-or dichotomies reductionist, English-only pedagogies, toward a vision of democracy in which individuals and communities create and re-create themselves through multiple languages and discourses.

Although the spread of English has often been associated with death of indigenous languages in those countries to which it has been trans-planted. In India, to some extent, the role of English has not been replacive; it has not driven out any of the indigenous languages as far as English purely as a language is concerned. It has enriched Indian languages as well as it has been enriched by them. It seems that English now belongs to India's linguistic repertoire in a very natural way, but it is still a language of 'ideas not of emotions'.

Central Concern of English Study

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

Ajeet Singh

Reviewing the Role of English Studies in a Global Cultural and Linguistic Context

11

Language is the principle means whereby culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from one generation to another. The relationship between the identities of students – including ethnic background, race, language, gender as well as elective social networks and practices – and the effective teaching of English literature and language within a diverse social milieu, is a central concern for English Studies in this age of globalization. “What is culturally responsive curriculum? Does it aim to reflect the ethnicities of students in the classroom, pay homage to as diverse an array of nationalities and ethnicities as possible, and connect with the youth generation” (Gay, 28)? English teachers wrestle with these questions in classroom teaching.

Globalization and international status of English language locate English teachers as mediators of both language and culture. In English teaching, differing interpretations, contesting ideologies and struggles between frames for meaning are central to the concerns of globalization. Globalization is (re)shaping and (re)defining literature, language, composition and mass media in an expanded set of possible identities, discourses, subjectivities, communities, and modes of interpretation. Now English teachers have to locate themselves between the two extreme positions of cultural homogenization and harmonization by teaching English language and literature through inter-cultural, reader-response theories of literary interpretation, socio-cultural methods of language-study, and juxtaposed multi-media representations.

Globalization and international status of English language locate English Studies as a focal point in any discussion about linguistic and cultural phenomenon in the present scenario. In a multicultural hub like India, English Studies reflects itself within a matrix of sociolinguistic theories of language, IT revolution and global interdependency. Changes in the curriculum reflect these trends. Academic World is facing new challenges about the purposes and priorities of English Studies. Issues like intercultural communication, balancing a democratic discourse or ‘common culture’ with respect for diverse values and managing opposing views and resistance to curriculum change have become substantial points to be considered. Furthermore, the divide between inherited curriculum and socio-cultural transformation is also an emerging factor in this regard.

Across Levels of Experience

English is reconceptualized, across levels of experience, for social diversity and global change. The English classroom, now, is considered as a space for cultural conversation where the dialogue gives way to inter-textual and inter-cultural transactions. Beyond these, English teachers have their own perception regarding changing role of the text and written and oral dialogue in the classroom. English teachers designate a space of difficulty, change and possibility in their responses, for example, while defending Shakespeare, taking radical measures to reconstruct booklist for cultural relevance and global consciousness.

Considering the current position of English in the globalized world, it is not possible to neglect it or undermine its potential in forming or framing any social, political, economic and cultural meaning of various institutions and ideologies. In most of the discussions, English language and English Studies are associated with its colonial legacy, imperialism and hegemony. The world-wide spread of English language is held responsible for extinction of a large number of languages and cultures of the world. Maintaining this attitude to English may have its own repercussions for a world where English has become a language of mass communication and an

indispensable tool for inter-linguistic and inter-cultural dialogue between and among various communities. Hence, it is imperative to maintain a delicate equilibrium between linguistic and cultural imperialism and communication chaos. Committed and determined efforts are needed to 'buck the tide' of linguistic and cultural repression by revitalizing indigenous languages and cultures with the help of English language. English Studies may prove to be one of the means to get the world come closer and a sight for linguistic and cultural harmony. With the human rights approach English language teachers may work towards the maintenance of linguistic diversity by stipulating the linguistic rights of speakers of languages which might be threatened. Curriculum, texts and teaching – all these issues must be dealt with critical awareness of their associated linguistic and cultural dimensions and significance.

Works Cited

Gay, G. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.

Joshi, Svati. Ed. *Rethinking English: The Cultural Politics of Literature, Language and Pedagogy in India*. New Delhi: Trianka, 1991.

Ajeet Singh
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya
Khanpur Kalan, Sonipat-131305
Haryana
berwalajeet@gmail.com