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English Language Teaching in India: A Brief Historical Sketch

Wajahat Hussain, Ph.D.

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Abstract

English is a widely spoken language today. It has often been referred to as ‘global language’, the lingua franca of the modern era and currently the language most often taught as a second language around the world. With the Information Technology revolution and most software and operating systems being developed in the English language, a new utility for written and oral communication in the English language has emerged. English is said to be the world’s most important language having communicative and educative value. English is used all over the world not out of any imposition but because of the realization that it has certain advantages. A very important reason for regarding English as a world language is that the world’s knowledge is enshrined in English. It is a progressive language. It is dynamic and flexible. Furthermore, English is universally renowned for its power of expression and its rich literature. The changing times have witnessed the growing importance of the English language in all walks of life. It does not seem that we are using the English language as non-native speakers, or as a second language.

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Conscious and unconscious use of the words in our everyday conversation from the English language bears evidence to this fact. Therefore, the English language has become the primary requirement for interconnectedness of people, and for free exchange of ideas, cultures and economies and a *lingua franca* for communication, business and education. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the status and importance of teaching English as a second or foreign language in India over the years.

English Language Teaching in India

English language has the status of associate official language, but in fact it is the most important language of India. After Hindi it is the most commonly spoken language in India and probably the most read and written language in India. English in India is used not only for communicating with the outside world, but also for inter-state and intrastate communication. Because of the great ethnic and linguistic diversity found within our nation, English acts as an indispensable ‘link’ language. English symbolizes in Indian minds better education, better culture and better intellect. English also serves as the communicator among Indians who speak different languages. English is very important in some systems like the legal, financial, educational and business in India.

India has a history of two hundred and fifty (250) years of English teaching, beginning as early as 1759 by the East India Company. The growth of English can be traced back to the advent of formal education in India during the first half of the 19th century. In fact, before the oncoming of the British, priestly classes like ‘Moulavies’ and ‘Pandits’ were the custodians of education who imparted education to a fraction of the people in ‘Pathshalas’ and ‘Madarsas’. There was no instructional programme for the masses. But the state of education at present in India is better than the traditional one.

The importance of English Language Teaching was realized from time to time, but it gained momentum after Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835, it was motivated more by a political administrative necessity than by an urge to bring about social transformation. Lord Macaulay, in his famous “Minutes”, recommended the use of English for educating the Indian masses. He felt

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that the English language was the only suitable medium to transfer technical knowledge and scientific bent of mind to Indians. His aim was to groom a small section of Indians who could later use English as medium of communication and bridge the gap between India and the western world. But the sole purpose was to create a body of clerks to assist in the administration of the country.

Macaulay's 'Minute' very clearly argues for English as the medium of instruction at higher levels, rather than the oriental languages. The 'Minute' constitutes an example of colonialist and imperialist attitude of superiority. Macaulay averred that the Oriental languages did not possess any knowledge worth preserving:

“I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education....”

“We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great masses of population” (Macaulay, 1979: 116).

Lord Macaulay was a central figure in the language debate over which language(s) should be used as the medium of education in India. The orientalist were in favour of use of classical languages of Indian tradition, such as Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, which were not spoken as native languages. The Anglicists, on the other hand, supported English. Neither of these groups

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wanted to surpass the local vernaculars, mother tongues of the people. Both the groups agreed that education would be conducted in the vernacular during the first years of education.

The Anglicist group included Charles Grant, Lord Moira, T.B. Macaulay and H.T. Prinsep. The views of these Anglicists have been expressed in the Minute of Macaulay. According to the document which had been prepared for the governor general William Bentinck, after listening to the argument of the two sides, a class should be formed in India, a group of people who would act as interpreters between the British and Indians, ‘a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect’ (Baily 138).

Macaulay’s proposal was a success because in his thinking Indian languages would be enriched by English, so that they could become vehicles for European scientific, historical and literary expression. English gradually became the language of government, education, advancement and a symbol of imperial rule and of self-improvement.

But a section of Indian Political Class resisted the introduction of English Education, and the existing facilities for oriental and vernacular instruction were retained. It was a kind of three—language formula in colonial India. While English taught as a subject in all schools and most colleges. The status of the language and the emphasis on its teaching learning varies from region to region. In some areas it is accorded the status of an official language and its teaching begins in the fifth or sixth year of schooling. In spite of the variations in the status accorded to English the fact remains that all students completing their school education have had at least five years of English learning.

Considering the fact that India at present has such a vast infrastructure for teaching English to so many learners and the fact that quite a large number of institutions like English and Foreign Languages University, the Regional Institutes of English and the National Council of Educational Research and Training are constantly engaged in the process of experimenting with methods and materials of teaching English, it is natural to expect that proficiency level of English amongst educated Indians would be high. It is a fact that India had been exposed to English for two hundred years during the British Raj and it is the medium of instruction in the

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most institutions of higher and specialized education. Besides, English is used extensively by the administrators of the Central Government and the higher officials of the Judiciary.

In the present day India, fanatic opposition to the study of English has almost disappeared and more and more people have begun to realize the cultural, technological and international advantages that flow from the study of English. In the wake of this new mode of thinking, the position of English was reviewed once again by the study group on teaching of English in 1971. 'At the individual level, English serves as the language of opportunity. Any individual seeking socio-economic advancement would find the ability in English an asset' (Report of Study group on teaching of English of 1971). It bestowed upon English the status of a 'literary language'.

This has added a new dimension to the teaching of English in modern India such as catering to the current needs of the learner to impart the students' basic communication skills with a view to using it as a literary language, as a link language, and as an associate official language, etc. This has changed the Indian conditions and the concept of English Syllabus designing has to depend on the role of English in general and objectives of teaching English in particular.

Verma highlights the theoretical considerations underlying the concept of effective teaching and learning of English in India as a second language in the following lines:

“Learning English as a second language in India is a process of learning ‘how to mean’ in a new socio-cultural setting, it is a process of enculturation, of capturing, expanding, and refining a network of formal and socio-cultural systems in interaction. English in India is what it is because of its functions which are controlled by its socio-cultural setting and by its interaction with the major Indian languages. This socio-cultural approach to English in India is designed to show how the lexico grammatical systems of a language get shaped and reshaped by its functions. There is, therefore, no feel that English in India is or will be less effective or less efficient as a system of communication, but there is every reason (linguistic and/or socio-linguistic) to say that it has and will continue to have a marked Indian flavour” (Verma, 1988: 35).

English symbolizes in Indian minds, better education, better culture and higher intellect. In present times, English is the most preferred language. The Indians and the Indian English language press use many words derived from Indian languages. Indian accent is sometimes difficult for non-Indians to understand. Actually English has co-existed in the Indian sub-continent alongside thousands of local languages. It has remained at the core of Indian society.

To understand the real picture of English Language Teaching in India it is essential to look at its history and development. The East India Company furthered the process of teaching English in association with the British parliament by trying to maintain schools for Indians. The charter act of 1813 signified the beginning of East India Company's responsibility for educating Indians. It was at this time that the question of the medium of instruction raised intense controversies both among the British officials and the Indians. One school of thought among the officials advocated the encouragement of oriental languages like Sanskrit and Arabic. A second wanted to promote the regional language. The strongest group however, was in favour of English as the medium of instruction in all spheres of education. The Indians of the day themselves were undecided about the proposed alternative.

Raja Mohan Roy felt that the system of classical education would keep the country in darkness and associated English with a promise of modernization and liberation. This was the beginning of the first ever conscious attempt at introducing English language teaching in India. Unfortunately it was dictated more by a political—administrative necessity than by larger interest of mass education or a promise of modernization and liberation. Raja Roy writes in the foreword of *Kanthapura* 'We shall have English language with us and amongst us, and not as a guest or friend but as one of our own, of our castes, our creed, our sect and of our tradition' (In his foreword to *Kanthapura*).

The policy of the administrators consciously prompted association of English with a status of privilege. This combined with selective education to 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay 130) led to a sharper division between the few elite (castes) on the one hand and the vernacular educated and

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the illiterate masses (lower castes and classes with less or no access to English education) on the other with bitter hatred in between.

One of the great achievements of this period was the expansion of education and adaptation of vernacular as medium of instruction at the school level. This however did not promote multilingual and multiculturalism and it became a controversial issue. For some time, there was no consensus on this issue. In 1950, the Constitution of India finally laid down that Hindi in Devanagiri script would be the official language of the Union of India. It was expected that by 1965, Hindi would be able to develop as a language of mass communication and would replace English. However, it did not settle the language controversy in the country. In 1956, a three—language formula (Report of the official language commission 38) was adopted by the central advisory Board of education to resolve this controversy. This formula was accepted by the conference of Chief Ministers in 1961. (Report of the commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India: Vol. 27) It provided for the teaching of:

- i. the regional language and the mother tongue when the latter is different from the regional language;
- ii. Hindi or in Hindi speaking areas, another Indian language; and
- iii. English or any modern European language.

The three—language formula was more of the nature of a political solution than of any educational value. The change over from English to Hindi was not possible.

Even in the post-independence period the status of English is still a link language among the educated people and the few elites. In spite of the introduction of the Hindi as the official language English still played the important role. But in this way it did not bring about any significant change in the status of English on the contrary, it resulted in the creation of a class of vernacular—educated native to occupy lower position both in education and administration (Agarwal, 1985: 467).

Thus, in India formal language teaching began with a language controversy. In order to resolve this controversy a sort of three language formula was adopted to teach English, oriental

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languages and regional languages. Under this formula, English became a marker of two levels of social operations—the upper level reserved for the vernacular English in pre—independent remained limited to the elite few. Even among them it was confined to a very limited behavioural situation. At that time, English was not adopted as means of communication.

Another landmark in the history of the role of English in the Indian education system was the Wardha Scheme of Education in 1936. Under this scheme Mahatma Gandhi strongly recommended that ‘all instructions were to be imparted in the scholar’s mother tongue and not in any foreign language at the school level’ (Gupta 1035). The experiment of this scheme was permanently cut short by the outbreak of the Second World War and consequent resignation of the congress ministers in 1939.

In 1944, the Central Advisory Board of Education prepared a scheme for educational development of India to be taken up after the conclusion of the World War II. As Sargent, the Education Advisor to the Government of India was the head of this board the new scheme also came to be known as the Sargent Scheme. This scheme incorporated many features of the Wardha Scheme of education, yet it was more comprehensive than the latter.

It made recommendations with regard to:

- (i) Basic education,
- (ii) Secondary or High School education,
- (iii) University education,
- (iv) Health and Physical education, etc. (Singh, 2007: 125).

The scheme made provision for free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years. The use of vernaculars was allowed up to High School with English as one of the compulsory subjects. At the university level, English used to be the medium of instruction. The Sargent Scheme was a document of immense educational value.

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Therefore, English has been considered as a major foreign language in India since independence. As the world is getting globalized, there has also been a sense of English as a global language, not just a language of the USA or the UK. Although English was considered as a major foreign language in India, Indians in different contexts are more likely to have witnessed, or experienced benefits of having more competence than before. These changes in the functions and benefits have brought about change in the status of English from that of a foreign language to a global language.

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