THE ROLE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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Introduction

We, the Indians, have had a strange relationship with the English language. It is the language of the foreign rulers. It would be absolutely dishonest to deny that the British rule had no advantages for the subject country. It would be also equally dishonest to deny that the British ruled India without active help or cooperation of a large section of Indians. However, it is interesting to note that the Anglophobia of pre-independence era lost much of its original force after independence. In fact, we can say that it gave place to a new kind of Anglophilia which was reflected in our foreign policy with regard to Great Britain and in the eagerness of Indian masses to learn English irrespective of the level of proficiency which they could achieve.

The history of the British in India is important and interesting in itself. It has a meaningful relevance to a research study on the undergraduate learners’ attitudes towards the English language. The chapter is divided into two sections: the growth and development of English in India and English Language Teaching in Gujarat.

The Coming of the English in India

At first, the Briton set foot on Indian soil as a trader, established himself among the natives adroitly, consolidated his position through military force and intrigue, remotely-controlled from England.

(R K Narayan 1989)

Macaulay was the man who laid the foundations of English Language Teaching in India. There was a growing demand for English as a medium of instruction. A few enlightened Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated the use of English. The debate between the Orientalists (those who favoured
the use of a native language - Sanskrit or Arabic) and the Anglicists (those favouring English) was set at rest, finally, by Macaulay's Minutes of 1835. Lord Macaulay was for the spread of Western learning through the medium of English:

_We have to educate a people who can not be educated at present by means of their mother tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claim of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate._

_(Cited in Krishnaswamy et al. 1992)_

Nirad C Chaudhuri (1897-1999), a well-known Indian writer who wrote in English and Bengali, settled in England in 1970. He is popularly said to have claimed that he was “the last Englishman to leave India.” He courted controversy in newly independent India by dedicating his autobiography “to the memory of the British empire in India” because, in his words:

_… all that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by the same British rule._

_(Chaudhuri, Nirad 1994)_

**English Language Teaching (ELT) In India**

India is a multi-lingual country. The Indian Union (1950) adopted Hindi in Devnagari script as the national language. It is ironic, however, that our constitution was first drafted in English and then translated into Indian languages. This irony is the metaphor for the place of English in India. It was decided that English would continue as an associate official language till 1965 by which time Hindi was expected to develop as a language for mass communication and replace English. However, this did not happen (Sood 1988). Indians have not yet been able to clearly define the role and status of English in India. Some want to retain English while others want to do away with it once and for all. Many people accept English as a "necessary evil", in that they publicly declare that the language should be thrown out of country and at the same time send their children or grandchildren to good English medium schools (Krishnaswamy et al. 1992).

In linguistic complexity India is almost like the continent of Europe. And in this highly multilingual national context, English has the constitutional status of an "associate official language“. As such it is
the dominant medium of communication in administration, higher education, industry and commerce, science and technology, and journalism. The value of English can hardly be overestimated in the given circumstances. English has been variously described as the "window on the world", and as "language of opportunity or development". One finds more books in English than in any other Indian language, especially books related to science, technology, arts, valued professions, and education. English continues to be used as a link language across the country.

Such importance of English may easily mislead one into believing that "all is well" with the teaching of English in India. However, we need a few facts to get in touch with reality. The status and role of English have not changed in post-independence India. But the standard of English teaching has certainly deteriorated (Sood 1988). There are all kinds of varieties of English to be found across the country, ranging from a near native variety to a bazaar variety (Krishnaswamy et al. 1992). Only about five percent of the total population of India is estimated to know English and a large proportion of this is “concentrated in the largest cities of the country” (Prabhu 1987). Millions of learners are eager to learn English but the resources are limited, methods of teaching are not suitable to the learners' requirements, and teachers are not well trained. Expensive English medium schools and almost-free government schools exist side by side to cater to the demand for English education. What this practically means is that some learners from the upper class or high-income background have a greater exposure to the language than other learners who are not so fortunate.

ELT situation in India suggests an absence of any kind of language planning; especially in the teaching of English. Even when policies have been framed, their implementation has been unsatisfactory because of lack of political will or lack of co-ordination among the concerned agencies like the central and the state government/s or universities (Krishnaswamy et al. 1992). This has led to an "aimless drift" and striking dissimilarities can be found as regards to the school year when the teaching of English begins, the total number of school years during which it is taught, whether it is used as a medium of instruction at some level or not, class size and examination (Prabhu 1987; Jadeja 1988).

The age at which the teaching of English starts at school varies among different states. But, generally, it is between 7 and 12 years. The teaching of English at school-leaving stage is compulsory in some states while not in others. As a result, the number of years for instruction of English at school also varies from one state to another. For example, in Gujarat, English is an
optional subject from standard V to VII and from standard X onwards. English may or may not be a medium of instruction at university or graduation level in different universities. Class size also varies from state to state, but the average size of class in secondary schools is between 40 and 60 (Prabhu 1987). It does not seem probable that any uniform pattern for teaching of English will be adopted across the country, not at least in the near future.

**English Language Teaching (ELT) In Gujarat**

The state of Gujarat came into existence on May 1, 1960 as a result of the Bombay Reorganisation Act. The predominantly Gujarati speaking northern and western portions of erstwhile Bombay state and the regions of Saurashtra formed what is Gujarat today. A few weeks after the bifurcation, the Government of Gujarat deliberated on its own educational policy (Jadeja 1988). The Government also appointed the L. R. Desai committee to discuss the place of English in the educational set up of the state and to study the various aspects of ELT requirements. The then Minister of Education, Late Shri Hitendra Desai addressed a press conference (June 1960) and specified his Government's stand on the teaching of English in the state that English be taught in standards VIII, IX, X and XI as a compulsory subject; and that schools be allowed to teach English as an optional subject in standards V through VII, outside the school hours. It was to be understood that the Government would not release grants to pay the teachers teaching English in standards V through VII (Natraj, S. 1989).

The L. R. Desai Committee presented its report in 1961 and recommended that the teaching of English at the primary level be discontinued. The learners were to receive an intensive teaching of English as a compulsory subject in classes VIII through X. As against Mr. Desai's (the then Education Minister) earlier press release, the committee decided to make English an optional subject at standard XI which was the school leaving year at that time when Gujarat state followed 11+4 pattern of education. The Gujarat state switched over to the 10+2+3 pattern of education in 1976 and in effect ever since.

The Desai committee advocated the Structural Approach in ELT. The Structural Approach was in vogue during those years and a set of syllabuses was framed on those lines for standards VIII through X. Standard XI was the revision stage for the language items the students had learnt during the three preceding years. The committee recommended that the number of periods assigned to the teaching of English be raised from 8 to a maximum of 12 per week (Natraj, S. 1989).
English Language Teaching in Gujarat has always had to suffer because of the post-bifurcation (1960) Gujarati leaders’ enthusiasm for Gandhian principles of education. Gandhi had called for the boycott of everything that bore a foreign impression. He favoured "Swadeshi" goods. He had nothing personally against English language but advocated the use of indigenous languages in its place. The masses could not understand English and he wanted to talk to the people in a language they understood. But the Gandhians in the state vehemently opposed the introduction of English at the primary level. In the late seventies English was introduced at the primary school level but as an "optional subject."

There are many problems that English Language Teaching faced within the state. The syllabus and the teaching materials are "structural" in approach but in practice, most teachers adopt Grammar-Translation method. Most school teachers are inadequately trained and are not confident even to form a few sentences in English on their own. Our teachers are usually concerned with "finishing" the course contents within a set time-limit of the academic year. Nobody cares how much language learning actually takes place. There is no exposure to English in or outside the classroom. Even after learning English for some five to eight years, our students are not capable of writing independently in English. Speaking English is almost an impossibility. Examinations rarely test learners' oral fluency in English. Teaching aids are nominal. Class size is usually big, something between 40 and 60 students in each English class. Teaching of English is carried out in our schools in such a way that the students either fear or hate it. Sometimes it is both.

Very few Gujaratis can be found in the lists of successful candidates in the competitive examinations at the national level. It is often pointed out that the only reason of their poor performance in these exams is their poor knowledge of English. Even in the professional courses like medicine, engineering etc. one major obstacle for the Gujarati students is English. We do in fact have proficient teachers at college or university level but there is much more emphasis on teaching of literature. And, whatever language teaching takes place, it is carried out through "lecture method." Teachers who have done their MA with English Literature teach students in different faculties. In the lecture sessions, there are not many opportunities to improve the students’ language skills. Sometimes you find that the students do not possess adequate knowledge of the language and yet they are taught advanced composition or comprehension of literary passages. We have limited resources for education in general and for the teaching of English in particular. But what is more painful is the fact
that these limited resources seem to be wasted or not properly utilized. Such is the state of English Language Teaching in Gujarat.

It is heartening to note that during the last decade the Government of Gujarat initiated a few ELT projects with a view to offering school and college students in the state opportunities to improve their knowledge of the language. The focus has been to prepare a generation of students who can use the language for further education and employment. Two notable projects of the Government of Gujarat in this regard are: Society for Creation of Opportunity through Proficiency in English (SCOPE), and Digital English Language Laboratory (DELL). The following brief description of these projects is based on the information provided in the official website of the State Government as on November 21, 2011.

**The Society for Creation of Opportunity through Proficiency in English (SCOPE)**

The Society for Creation of Opportunity through Proficiency in English (SCOPE) has been setup by the Government of Gujarat with a view to building English language proficiency in the youth of Gujarat and thereby to create employment opportunities for them. SCOPE has a target to train 5,00,000 youth in business English in a period of four years at 1000 training centers to be set up (at school as well as colleges) across Gujarat. For this purpose the state is divided into three zones in which English Language Teaching programme would progress simultaneously.

SCOPE programme has been introduced in collaboration with the Cambridge University. The trainees are provided with study material to develop the three language skills – listening, speaking, and reading. The fourth component of the course is grammar. On successful completion of the course, the trainees are given certificates for passing the concerned level of examination (conducted by ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages) from Level AI to CI as the case may be.

**The Digital English Language Laboratory (DELL)**

The DELL programme focuses on training college students to use English fluently in real, day-to-day life through language learning software approved and provided by the Department of Higher Education, the Gujarat State. A number of DELL centres have been set up at different colleges across the state. Each DELL centre is looked after by a co-ordinator from the concerned college. The co-ordinators are also trained by experts on how to use language software and how to use the
equipments. The programme is financed by the State Government which also provides technical know-how.

References:


www.scopegujarat.org

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