The Teaching of English in India; Society and Change

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Introduction: English is taught in India very extensively as a compulsory second language or a third language in all schools and most colleges. The status of the language and the emphasis on its teaching and learning varies from region to region. In some areas it is accorded the status of an official language and teaching begins in the first year of school. In some others it is accorded the status of a second language and teaching begins in the fifth or sixth year of schooling. Inspite 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 has such a vast infrastructure for teaching English to so many learners and the fact that quite a large number of institutions like Central Institute of English, the Regional Institutes of English and the National Council of Educational Research and Training are constantly engaged in the process of experimenting with methods of 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 most institutions of higher and specialized education. Besides, English is used extensively by the administrators of the Central Government and the higher echelons of Judiciary.

However, inspite of these and a substantial amount of creative literature in English, proficiency levels in English are poor. A majority of the learners coming out of the schools and colleges possess communicative skills in English.

The Spread of English: No one knows for certain how English spread in India. It is generally assumed that the first contact with the English came through the travellers and traders in the fifteenth and sixteenth
century. It spread more rapidly as the British established themselves as the paramount power during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Majumdar 1971:403). However, the spread of English in India is quite different from that of America. Firstly, the number of native-English-speaking-migrants was quite small. Secondly, when the English came to India they found a well developed and established multilingual and multicultural community. Besides, as Schuchardt observes the English who came to India made no attempt to learn the local vernaculars. Rather, to communicate with the local people they used "Dubhashes" or local Indians who had picked up enough English to act as interpreters, between the British and Indian traders. It is through these native interpreters that the bulk of the untranslated native expressions, which gave a distinct character to the speech of Englishmen who came to India, was introduced into the English language (Gilbert (Ed.) 1980:53).

History suggest that at the early stage there was no formal or systematic attempt to teach English to Indians. In fact in the multilingual and multicultural Indian subcontinent at this time there was no tradition for teaching second language at all. Though some attempts were made by Englishmen to break the language barrier, it was much easier for Indians to pick up English through informal contacts as different languages were spoken in different regions (Datta 1991:63).

The Process of Indianization of English:

The informal contact way of the spread of English naturally gave way to the development of several varieties of English in course of time, in different parts of the country. Among these are Boxwallah English of Upper India, Butler English of Bombay and Babu English of Bengal. These varieties have all the qualities of a pidgin like limited vocabulary and elimination of many grammatical devices of number and gender (Mehrotra 1982; Widdowson 1979).

The features common to all varieties of English which developed in India however, is markedly reflected in the vocabulary and pronunciation. Since English came to play a functional role in the Indian context it had to expand and adopt from the existing linguistic environment. Peculiarities of pronunciations like inability to distinguish between /b/and /v/ in Bengal, between /e/ and /æ/ in Gujarat or rounding of vowels in Orissa are but a few examples of this. Vocabulary items like ryot, jodhpurs, hartal and maidan came to be incorporated within the language.
One can say that a process of hybridization came in English, where new words and expressions by combining units of two different languages began to be used. In fact the language contact situation of this time only encouraged this and expression like Lathi-charge and Sepoy detachments came to be used more and more.

Along with the process of hybridization, there has also come about a peculiar situation of code-mixing and code-switching even in the Indian languages. Studies conducted by Datta (1984), Gumprez (1982), Kumar (1982) Kachru (1978) have shown that not only do Indians mix words from their own language while speaking English, but they do often use English words while speaking in their own tongues. This probably has come about from the contact of English and the mother-tongue in a very intense way. English and the vernacular languages have come to signify two parts of the existence of most educated Indians. So whereas English has adopted words from the Indian languages similarly the Indian languages have also adopted words from English.

**Status of English during the British Raj:**

Once the British became the administrators of India, the status of English underwent a sea change. From being a foreign language used by a handful of traders for the purpose of trade it became the language of the rulers. Though still considered as a foreign language it became the language of administration. Indians were quick to see the advantages of learning English and they started learning it.

Even patriotic Indians started realizing the advantages the knowledge of English offered and advocated its learning. The fact remains that in the three Presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, English came to be learnt with lot of enthusiasm as a window to the world of knowledge science, technology and philosophy. It was this generation of Educated Indians of the nineteenth century who brought about the Indian Renaissance.

**Early Methods of Teaching English:**

The British Government's Education Policy did not suggest any methodology for teaching English in India. The attempts of the Missionaries in teaching English were haphazard and nothing much is known about the methods adopted by them. However, in most of the vernacular medium of schools the Grammar-Translation Method was adopted (Ganguly 1986:62). This was favoured by the Indian teachers because most of them had poor
abilities in the spoken form of the language and this approach saved them from speaking English in their classes, they preferred to make their learners learn by vote the grammatical patterns of English. It was also preferred as it did not demand any teaching aids and large groups could be handled by a single teacher. This approach made the learners strong in grammar but neglected to develop the communicational skills in English (Mackey 1965).

The early parts of twentieth century saw the influence of Palmer, Sweet and Jesperson on English teaching in India. The result was the development of what we call Direct Method. In India its adoption saw the emphasis on suppression of mother tongue (Ghosh). Most probably the British teachers in Indian schools found this approach to be most suitable because it made it possible for them to teach in India without the necessity of having to learn the Indian languages. This method appeared to work in the English medium schools, where what was being learnt in the English class was not the only source for gaining proficiency in English. English also got learnt incidentally in the other classes as well. Thus learners in the English medium schools became proficient communications in the language as a result of their exposure to English during their entire school day.

In vernacular medium schools however, this approach proved to be a disastrous one. The over emphasis on unilingual presentation and the incidental presentation of grammar confused both the teachers and learners alike. With the result no language learning seemed to take place. In fact it proved to be disastrous in most Indian schools. This also saw the beginning of the growth of two categories of learners one proficient in English as a result of attending English medium schools and another poor communications in English as a result of not being exposed to the communicative use of the language.

The Role and Status of English in Independent India:
The consequence of about two hundred years of British rule in India is that English has been firmly transplanted into Indian soils. During British Raj its status had been raised to that of an Official Language. It had also become the medium of instruction in a great number of schools and colleges, and still remains the predominant medium of instruction for Higher Education. Amongst the educated Indians, it has become the means of communication across language barriers. In fact, as has been pointed out, the English language attained status in India that had been