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Teaching English in 21st Century India

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With reference to linguistic complexity, India is like European continent. There are 24 official languages in Europe whereas there are 22 official languages in India. In such a highly multilingual context, English stays as a very important language. It obviously enjoys the status of an 'associate official language' and the most powerful medium of communication in administration, higher education, industry and commerce, science and technology, journalism etc. From Kashmir to Kerala and from Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh English remains a national link language. We cannot ignore the importance of English as a language of power, progress, knowledge and national integrity.

Since independence the importance and relevance of English language have not been changed much, but the standards of English Language Teaching have gone down. English is a universal language woven with our life in so many ways that we cannot arrive at a uniform standard of English Language. Everyone wants to learn and acquire command over English language. From pauper to prosperous, everyone wants his child to study through English medium. There is high demand for English medium schools across the country. While talking about growth of English medium schools run by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) the Indian Express reports:

"The trend of 'other' medium schools shutting down began in 2006, but in less than a decade the number of English Medium schools has grown to 55 in 2022-23 from just one in 2013-14...English medium schools have emerged as the fastest growing even at the cost of schools in regional language mediums."

(Sharma 2022)

English has many advantages over other languages. It is widely and undisputedly used as 'lingua franca' not because of any imposition but because of its utilitarian value. It has become essential for success in the field of diplomacy, education, communication, technology, media, business, trade and commerce. English is the official language in 59 nations and 27 non-sovereign entities around the world. Many world organizations have recognized English as their official language, e.g. United Nations, European Union, Commonwealth of Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of American States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, PIF, UKUSA etc. Today we can't think of internet, social media, AI and other tools without English. There is a huge and ever increasing reservoir of knowledge available on internet through English.

English is ever growing and ever adapting language. It's accommodating and assimilating nature constantly enriches and makes it more and more relevant. Being progressive, dynamic and flexible language, English has become more popular, powerful and effective language. Some of the richest and classical literatures are found in English. English excels in power of expression too. The increasing number of learners and speakers of English prove the importance of English language. According to a report issued by the British Council,

"English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide – that's one in every four [in 2013]. By 2020, we forecast that two billion people will be using it – or learning to use it."

(Robson 2)

This included those who spoke English as a second language (ESL). The native English speakers and non-native English speakers together reached up to approximately 400 million and made English the world's most widely spoken language.

India has always been a fascination for the rest of the world. Mark Twain rightly hailed it saying 'India is ... the birthplace of human speech.' (Twain 16) Many native languages have emerged in India. Of these languages, the Constitution of India identifies twenty-two of them as official or "scheduled" languages. Articles 344(1) and 351 of the Constitution of India, titled the Eighth Schedule as 'Languages', recognizes the following languages as official languages of states of India: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. (1949)

It is commonly seen in India that people can articulate in more than one language. They can read and write in more than one script too. The 15th Indian Census was carried out in the year 2011 which documented that 121 languages were spoken as mother tongues in India and more than 25% of the Indian population could speak two languages, while about 7% of the population could speak three languages. (2011)

English, in such a highly multilingual India, enjoys the eminence of an 'associate official language'. It is a link language across the nation and the dominant medium of communication in administration, academia, industry, commerce, science and technology, and media. A working knowledge of English has become essential in a number of fields, employments and professions; as a result over a billion Indians possess working knowledge of English. Now India is the largest English speaking country besides USA and the UK. Knowledge of English empowers us and has become a symbol of better education, better culture and higher intellect. So English is considered as the most favored language.

We find all kinds of varieties of English across the country. English is much valued in India but we must accept that the standard of teaching English in India needs much improvement. We worship English with so much fascination but we have not done enough for the English Language Teaching in India. Many Indians possess as much command over English as native speakers whereas many find it very difficult to articulate in English. Students of English can make choice between very expensive English medium schools and almost-free government schools. It is obvious that learners from the high-income group have a better opportunity to learn English than poor learners.

The state of ELT in India is very complex. There is very little scope for proper language planning. Education Policies are very well thought but their implementation has been disappointing because of lack of political will or lack of co-ordination among the stakeholders. The beginning of English teaching in schools varies from states to states. All states have not made compulsory to teach English at school-leaving stage. Similarly English is not a medium of instruction in all universities for bachelor degree programs. The prevailing ELT situation demands focused purpose and common uniform policy for teaching of English across the nation. With proper implementation of NEP 2020, we may achieve our long cherished goal.

English Language Teaching in our schools and colleges has failed to generate love and interest for English among students. The syllabus and the teaching materials are outdated and do not correspond to the latest findings and developments in the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English Language Teaching (ELT). The teaching methods are not being revised as per the need of the time. The role of teachers has been changed from 'treasure of knowledge' to 'facilitator'. They have lost their monopoly because everything else has been changed. Internet has made the knowledge free and accessible to all. The teachers are still 'happy' with 'chalk and talk' whereas the students have started exploring ChatGPT and many more. The resources are limitless and the students are more tech savvy than their teachers.

There is much less scope for innovation in curriculum. Teachers hardly do think beyond the syllabus. They aim at finishing the syllabus but do not bother about actual language learning which has to be happened. There is very little possibility to explore English beyond classroom and beyond the syllabus. So even after spending some five to ten years for learning English, our students are unable to get fluency in writing or speaking English.

Language is very much rooted in the culture, country and society. So native learners always find easy to acquire the mother tongue. Learning a foreign Language is always a great challenge. It requires will, courage and constant hard work. Such students constantly need motivation, guidance and support. They have very little knowledge of a system of rules, vocabulary, proper pronunciation, spellings, grammatical rules and proper sentence structure. They do not have habit or opportunity to use English at home and surroundings. Eventually they fail to express in English. Having lost their confidence and interest they spend all their ability in learning by rote to get through the exams and subsequently miss the 'real learning'. They approach English not as a language but as a subject. They do not want to acquire knowledge and master the language, but to get through exams and then forget. So they do not put their efforts in reading and understanding the original texts but they read sub-standard material available in the market. Students learn probable questions and their answers through translation from English to their own vernacular. Even after studying English for 10 to 15 years they do not possess linguistic ability to express their views in English. Linguistic mismatch between the mother tongue and the foreign language kills the process of learning. Let's hope that this issue may be resolved with the implementation of NEP 2020.

In the pre-independence era students having primary education were able to communicate in English whereas today's graduates fail to speak in English. So when the students appear for job interviews, they cannot speak English well and miss opportunities.

We have maximum numbers of English medium schools than ever before. Rema Nagarajan notes that 'More than a quarter of all schoolchildren in India now study in English-medium schools.' (2021). We have more than 20 lac schools today in India but we cannot find much scope for spoken English in the present education system. English medium schools and colleges have mushroomed in rural India also but they lack proper infrastructure and do not have teachers having command over English language. Teachers in many English Medium Schools teach other subjects through Hindi or vernacular. Qualified English teachers have degrees but many of them do not have skill, will, ability and experience to make English Teaching enjoyable and interesting. Language acquisition does not happen in terms of increase in vocabulary, fluency in speech and accuracy in writing. English is a language of communication, but this most important aspect of the global language is lost.

A teacher is a role model for language acquisition. If a teacher wishes he can solve all the issues stated above by systematic approach. The teacher should not try solely to impart knowledge but to teach several skills like Listening-Speaking-Reading-Writing. Teachers should make language learning enjoyable. His enthusiasm to teach and help students can boost the confidence of the pupil. He may use various tools, techniques and methods to make the learning effective. He should also encourage his pupils for presentations, group discussions, projects, seminars and research.

There are ample opportunities for English Language Teaching in India irrespective of so many challenges. Millions of learners are keen to learn English but the resources are inadequate, methods of teaching do not match to their necessities and teachers are not trained enough to teach the language. The present ELT

scenario in India reminds us Milton's satire on the corrupt clergy who fail to provide spiritual guidance to the 'flock' of devotees: "The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed" (125)

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