

# Role of English in Higher Education

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Language is a veritable vehicle of discourse and communication used by human beings. We acquire language skills in accordance with our need to disseminate and procure knowledge and education, to evince thoughts, feelings and emotions from our very birth under normal biological circumstances. The first language which the child acquires in order to express his/her feelings, is the 'mother-tongue' and any other language that he/she learns is his/her second language. In Indian English is more often than not the second language in many states and the honour of first language is occupied by the 'regional' languages. Albeit the status of English in India as a second or a foreign language is debatable, nevertheless, it enjoys the privilege of being an associate official language along with Hindi in Devnagari script.

## **The Coming of English:**

Precisely speaking English language came to India with the advent of British in India. At first it was the language of the Traders/Traitors, then the language of Ruler and eventually the language of the ruled. With the effort of the Christian Missionaries English was taught in the missionary schools in some parts of India. After the Battle of Plassey, the British traders turned rulers started two institutions i.e. Calcutta Madarssah in 1781 and Benaras Sanskrit College in 1791 with provision of teaching English. In 1813 when the charter of the East India Company was renewed the educational clause was added to it. Eventually the demand for teaching of English grew which resulted in the establishment of Hindu College in 1817 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb and David Hare, followed by Serampore College in 1818 and the

Bishop's College in 1820 by the missionaries. Thereafter, the foothold of English was further strengthened by the famous Macaulay's *Minute* in 1835 and Wood's *Despatch* in 1854. Whereas Macaulay emphasized the proliferation of western learning through the medium of English language in India, Wood recommended the medium of instruction to be English in Higher Education. The next hundred years saw the mushrooming of English medium schools meant for the upper class and middle class people, whereas the vernaculars were relegated to the lower class people.

## **Dethroning English:**

Immediately after the Independence English as the language of the rulers was dethroned and the Devnagari script was offered as the national language and English was declared as an associate language for 15 years, i.e. till 1965. But this change in the language diplomacy ignited severe oppositions from several quarters especially from South India. Thereafter the parliament passed an act in 1963 for making English as an associate official language for an indefinite period.

Thus the reinstating of the English language is an evidence of the impact of the language which has penetrated the hearts of the Indians. In a nation of regional and linguistic disparity, English worked as a unifying force. The 1971 census of India revealed that there are 380 languages or dialects. In this case English can play the role of a link language.

## **The Importance of English:**

The British had once upon a time spread its colonies in almost all parts of the world and wherever they went they left the gift of the language for the immeasurable treasure

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they stole. Thus English is the Lingua franca of the world. It is spoken and understood in most of the countries of the world. Only a few nations like the West African countries and writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o are still opposing the language with the apprehension that it has subverted their actual identities and culture. Nevertheless, it is patronized by USA, Canada, Australia etc. and countries like China, Japan, Pakistan, India are trying to keep up pace with the rest of the world in mastering the language. The Question is, why? The answer is as simple as that it is an international language. Language is power and that power can be wielded only when it is harnessed. For instance, if a writer writes a book of immense significance in a regional language or say, Hindi, then the scope of his writing will be limited to a selected few but if he writes in English then he shall find international audience which shall benefit the entire mankind. In other words any research work done in English shall widen its scope.

#### **Relevance of English in India**

Seeing the present job scenario in India we can assume that English can play a vital role in eradicating many problems. Unemployment is the most burning problem in India. Unemployment creates other problems like crime, corruption, terrorism, anti-social elements, etc. Since the government jobs are limited and even if the entire Indian population becomes educated the government cannot provide jobs to all. With the increase in literacy the race for job shall increase and there shall be more unemployed than ever. But as I have mentioned handling can find jobs for many unemployed but talented youths. Mere good command over English and a little computer literacy is enough to get a job in the private sector. Countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, etc. which are technologically advanced but have a low population density and high labour charge are providing ample job opportunities to India through business process outsourcing (BPO). Due to the large English speaking population, wide spread computer literacy, lower personal expenses,

strategically favourable time zone and high quality of work, India has become a major hub for International BPO activities. Moreover, in the coming years, the volume of BPO related activities and consequently the employment opportunities are expected to grow. Under these circumstances, if we train our students in English language they would stop running after government jobs. Aspirants for government jobs waste a good amount of their valuable time in preparing for the competitive exams and very few meet with success. This loss of valuable time is not only loss for them it is also a loss for the nation because such strong and potent minds are not utilized for that period of time in the service of the nation or to earn any revenue.

Apart from getting absorbed in the BPOs, many Master Degree holders in subjects like Education, Mathematics, Literature, etc. can seek jobs abroad. They can also pursue higher education abroad by taking up Common Wealth Examinations and GRE. Knowledge of English and any foreign language helps in translation work, tourist guides etc. Thus the scope for job increases if languages can be mastered. Since we cannot generate jobs within the country to remove unemployment, we can at least lend our services to other nations which shall earn revenue for ourselves as well for the nation.

#### **English and Higher Education in India**

Barring the English medium schools, the vernacular schools in India, mostly government aided schools, lay less emphasis on the teaching of English. The introduction of English at school varies from state to state. English is only a subject in these schools and not the medium of instruction. When these students pass out from schools and enroll in colleges and universities they find it difficult to compete with the students who have come from English medium schools. Since the language for Higher Education (in Universities, and in some colleges) in India is English, all students irrespective of their background have to study their subjects in English.

*Outline Case Study of English in Assam for present illustration: In Assam, English is an associate official language along with its regional counterpart, Assamese language. English is a subject, as well as the medium of instruction, in the convent schools, and some private schools under Board of Secondary Education, Assam (SEBA). On the other hand, English is taught as a subject in the vernacular medium schools, where the medium of instruction is either Assamese, or Bengali, or Hindi, or Bodo. In the vernacular medium schools, English was taught from standard V onwards till 1990s, which was later revised and was introduced from standard III, but in the current year, English has been introduced from Standard I onwards. If we go by the previous records, a student from vernacular medium has read English as a subject for 8 to 10 years before he enters the college to pursue his graduation course. On the other hand, a student from English medium background learns English as a subject along with English as a medium of instruction for 12 to 14 years intensively before he enters his graduation class. English is a compulsory paper in HSLCE, HS, and B.A. 1<sup>st</sup> year (1+1+1 pattern) and BA 2<sup>nd</sup> year (1+1+1 pattern). English is also the preferred medium of instruction at the PG level in Gauhati University except vernacular/MIL subjects. Under these circumstances, the teaching and learning of English is consequential because it is the language convenient for higher education. It is because advanced and up-to-date books on various subjects are readily available in English, whereas, books in vernacular languages are exiguous. Therefore, the students who have a good command over English get an edge over the ordinary students because they have an access to more information and knowledge.*

Thus some students are privileged whereas others have to suffer due to their ignorance of the language.

#### **Conclusion**

The importance of English in the present scenario cannot be denied. There are many private centers which offer coaching in spoken English. But I believe it could be done more sincerely, effectively, and economically for the students if it is incorporated in the government aided educational institutions. If the policies are changed along with the method of teaching of English, recruitment of teachers in English only from English medium background or those who have a command over spoken English despite their vernacular background, then these changes shall improve the quality of education. These issues are to be discussed more seriously than limiting them to research papers which may illuminate other possibilities of coping with the problem.

The government, whether state or central, spends a lot of money in the colleges in the name of Higher Education. But the quality of education had comparatively gone down in many institutes of higher learning due to many factors. The output of the colleges of Assam in matter of quality students is very poor. The funds though are utilized, the teachers though are handsomely paid, is more than proportionate than the result in most of the colleges. Comparatively the private junior colleges are at a constant pace in maintaining the quality of education. This is perhaps for this reason that these teachers are accountable to the institutions. The accountability of the teachers, the Principle, and the Administrative Officers is an important factor and decisive factor in determining the quality of higher education. If the teachers are sincere and the administration is honest then lot of positive changes can be brought into the society.

