

SOCIO-CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN INDIA

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This paper is an attempt to trace the route that English Language Education has taken in the past few decades in India with particular focus on Karnataka State. The trajectory has, as its starting point, the introduction of English Education by Lord Macaulay, the then Governor General, through his Minute (1835) and reaches a point of conflict, presently, between the two equally strong factors of Decolonization and Globalization guiding it.

The South Asian region as a whole and has a shared history geographically, and in terms of economy, Culture and Education. Most of them have common socio –economic and educational resources, face similar issues and experience similar constraints. The English language is an example of such a resource. The language was introduced in India during the British rule and it spread to other countries of the Indian sub-continent, most of them under British rule. The debate over the role and status of English, and the changing local and global contexts for its pedagogic practices and resources, continue to dominate the discussion, be it on policy or pedagogy.

Despite the historical bond and geo-political and educational proximity, the English language enjoys different statuses and is practised differently in the SAARC states. (South-Asian Association for Regional co-operation, SAARC is a regional body of socio-political and economic co-operation)

In South Asian English pedagogy and methodology, certainly during the British rule there was no focus on explaining the social, cultural and regional reasons for variations in South Asian English. The pedagogical materials provided for teaching were produced and managed by the agents of the Raj and in many States such strategies, primarily designed and recommended by the British Council or other western agencies still continue to be applied. The recognition of social, regional and functional variation in South Asian Englishes are conditioned and determined by various factors. The Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad, India (later renamed as English and Foreign Languages University) has been exploring this area of research, quite intensely.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The linguistic context of South Asian English manifests itself in many ways like in other major varieties world Englishes for example, United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada. In the recent years, the challenging issues of relating cultures, identities and pedagogy in teaching English have received considerable attention. At the time of its introduction, knowledge of English was thought to be a must for the intellectual development and moral elevation of the mostly uneducated Indian population

The status of English in the present context can be explained in terms of concentric circles as Braj.B.Kachru (1986) *The Alchemy of English, the spread of English and Models of non-native Englishes* puts it, The inner circle- refers to countries with English as native language, United Kingdom, United States, Australia, The outer circle- The countries which have acquired English due to colonial link to the language, Four (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) of the eight South Asian countries fall into this circle where English has been institutionalized and plays the role of an alternate (Second) language in multi lingual settings. The expanding circle- where English does not have any official status but it is recognized as a foreign language, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal fall in this circle.

English dominates language policies of all South Asian nations and it is the most sought after, most dominant and powerful language. As the language of the powerful colonizers, it fell into the hands of the social and political elites of the respective countries, eventually becoming the symbol of status. It also is a means to deculturize people from their own tradition, gain economic advantage and exercise control over education, employment and the power structure. In this era of globalization English together with technological development has been a significant economic advantage for some kinds of engagement with global economy- notably ICT enables services in India. As Braj B. Kachru says, the parameters of the power of English are

- a. Demographic and numerical – English has overwhelmingly and unprecedentedly spread across languages and cultures on every continent.
- b. Functional- It provides access to the most up-to-date knowledge and information.
- c. Attitudinal- English symbolizes neutrality, status, progressivism and liberation.
- d. Accessibility- It serves as a link language for people moving across regions.
- e. Pluri-centricity- English is the language of acculturation and assimilation with people of other cultures.
- f. Material- English is a tool for mobility, economic gains and social status.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The increasing power of English has caused *linguicide* (systematic extermination of a language) and dislocation of native cultural traditions by introducing ‘modernisation’ and ‘globalisation’. It has also been a tool of economic and political exploitation. It is acknowledged as a critical engine in the development of the current era of economic globalization. English has a complex and contradictory relationship to the life chances of individuals and to the social cohesion of communities. It is seen as the language of the global market that economic globalization relies on it and produces English speaking population all over the world and that an English literate workforce is a necessary pre-condition for effective participation in Global economic activity. The pervasiveness of English as the language of the global economy permeates local labour markets also determining that in many countries competence in English is a requirement for

appointment and promotion in local as well global companies. Since it is generally the local elites and upper middle classes who have access to English medium schools, it furthers local inequities and reinforces local and cultural divides.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

An important dimension of the dominance of English is its role in cultural globalization. English Language cultural artefacts like books, news papers, magazines, academic articles, films, video games, the images, the ideas, values, and orientations that accompany them, appear to have global reach. Dispersion of culture through, internet and social networking websites like facebook, Blog or Twitter provides access to western culture, thought and ideologies. The urban rural divide becomes more conspicuous.

This in turn serves to encourage social inequalities and creates subcultures within societies. The continental Multi-cuisine restaurants, McDonalds or Pizza Huts, celebrations of Mother's Day or Father's Day, including Friendship day, Western clothes and films, multiplexes and Malls that have immensely influenced the younger population, creating an elite sub-culture, to the extent that they alienate themselves from the 'ordinary' or local masses. English carries economic and cultural globalization and with it, the values and practices of the west.

English language and literacy is fundamentally embedded in the process of contemporary globalization and associated with the coercive dimensions of globalization as well. The extent of English language education and the curriculum and pedagogy employed in large scale English literacy programmes becomes a critical factor in determining how effectively individuals and communities can harness the potential for their advantage and minimize their coercive effects.

Like much of the developing world, the South Asian states are encountering a series of policy dilemmas generated by the opposing pressures of Decolonization and Globalization – which involves de-emphasizing English along with western values and practices. Asserting national Identity, promoting national languages, local knowledge, customs and practices associated with national Identity. On the other hand they are addressing the contradictory challenges of Globalization, global flow of people, capital and ideas around the world to deconstruct national boundaries, engage with the world, and accept difference in relation to language, culture, beliefs and social practices.

Education policy is fundamental to this project. The practical resolution of these policy dilemmas happens at the local level, irrespective of whether the teachers and administrators are prepared to accept and exercise their responsibility or not. The language policy for primary education in Karnataka is one such illustration.

While the Government is embroiled in an endless debate over the introduction of English as the medium of Instruction from class 1 or 5, in its schools, it is the private English schools which have made good of the situation. While the literate elite plead the Government for mother tongue (in this case Kannada) to be the medium of Instruction (reasons for this being many, like prevention of lingocide, preservation of local culture and Identity, to beat the effects of Global culture, to beat the effects of Global culture etc.) the local masses are determined to send their children to English schools 'corments' (meaning convents) which will enable and empower their children with the linguistic capital to invest in the global business for economic gains. The recent statistics from the Education Department (primary) reveals the decline in enrollment in Government Schools (some are also on the verge of closure) both in

Urban and Rural areas, parents have started enrolling their children in private schools where they are taught in English Medium. The new English medium schools are making good business.

CONCLUSION

In this context, Global English presents fundamental challenges to educators at all levels. The first challenge would be to come to terms with history-- to understand the complex and contradictory roles that English education played in the process of colonization and to determine how English Education will contribute to the process of decolonization. The second challenge is to recognize the potential of South Asian Vernacular Englishes in the process of Globalization. The third challenge is to understand the specific needs and interests of local communities as they emerge and engage in the process of economic and cultural globalization.

To meet these challenges, all those involved in the process, from the policy makers to the practitioners of English Language Teaching need to understand English not only as a subject, a part of the curriculum, or a language entity, but also and more importantly as a cultural entity, a historical, social and economic phenomenon that shapes peoples' lives and life chances in the world.

Work Cited

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