

# A Study of Current Status Quo of English as a Second Language in India

## Study Done on West Bengal Schools

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This project studies English as a second language in India. A language is a means of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate. English is such a language which is universally accepted as a way of interaction in all parts of the world. But this language is not a language which India already possessed. It is a language which was adapted due to the British rule in India. English is the mother tongue of the Britishers. They had spread this language because of their own benefits. They wanted to trade and that was the sole purpose for which they came to India and later on started ruling the country and that is the only reason, some people who were a bit educated, were forced to learn English. Looking from the other perspective, English is not an Indian language. It is a foreign language. It is the language of the Britishers and therefore only there, English is a first language. As India is a land a vast culture, the different regions, or to be more specific, the different cities have different languages. On this basis, the topic can be seen from another perspective. This perspective the researcher has applied in project. Seen from the other side, all the state board school have their regional language as their first language in the schools and English as a second language like some state schools in west Bengal is affiliated to West Bengal board, some schools in Assam has Assam board, etc . They give more importance to their own regional language. So in these places English is the second language and their regional language is considered as the first language. But as per the latest news, English is the officially accepted language. It actually helps in interacting with other people from different parts of the world. It now has become a trend to speak in English. It is a trendy fashion in these days and the people who do not belong from English medium school are looked down by the so called English speaking people. Knowing English, these days are not only required to be educated but also to be a distinguished person among the whole lot of crowd.

Thanks to the globalization in all the fields, it necessitates the learning of a language which is international. Undoubtedly, English has become a world language rather than the language of only the English speaking countries such as the UK and the USA because the number of the people who use English as a means of communication exceeds much more than the number of the people who speak it as their mother tongue. Text materials

relating to the subjects of Science, Engineering and Technology as also Medicine are available only in English.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the above facts, learning English, the universal language, as a Second Language, becomes inseparable branch as also unavoidable in Indian education system.

### II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN INDIA.

It is interesting to note that India, a multilingual nation, is the third largest English speaking country after US and UK.. In India, it is increasingly being perceived as a 'must know' language. It has now become a ladder for upward social mobility and 'a window to the world'.<sup>2</sup> According to Timothy J. Scrase, "English is an international language. You feel humiliated if you cannot speak English. People think you are dumb."<sup>3</sup> The above quote makes it crystal clear that English as a language in India enjoys a respectable position. The language which is given such importance, the history of its origin should be unfolded.

#### 2.1 Pre-Independence Period.

From those undistinguished beginnings, English has now become a widespread language. The language, English, was brought by Britishers during their invasion in India after the incorporation of East India Company in 1600. English was the language of the rulers and as Indians were their colonial subjects, they were bound to learn English and in this way it started building its roots in India. The Britishers did not care about the cultural language of different parts of India. The Britishers feared to expose the Indians to the European style of education against the alien rule which happened with America. The Britishers adopted orientalism or encouragement of classical learning for their educational policy which was opposed by the missionaries like Charles Grant whose plan was to teach English

<sup>1</sup> MJAL, vol:1:1 February 2009 1:1 *Teaching English as a second line in India*- a review Murali.M.

<sup>2</sup> " The status of English language in India"

<sup>3</sup> Scrase, Timothy.,(2004)," The Hegemony of English in India" a paper presented in the 15th Biennial conference of the Asian studies association of Australia in Canberra 29 June -2 July 2004, page-1

to the people of India.<sup>4</sup> The people who were against English education revived Sanskrit and Persian learning. But noted Hindu and missionary leaders again advocated English education. But some middle class people aspired to learn English because they realized the power of English which could enable them to get jobs under the government with standard income and status in the society. The directors made a greater attempt. They felt the superiority of the English education but most Indians preferred English medium education to other lingual medium education because at that time there was a craze of learning foreign language, a completely new language which could give them good government jobs, status and income. The main motive of the Britishers behind spreading and teaching of English was to divide the Indians in two groups of people so as to make the learned people as interpreters between the rulers and the ruled. They aimed at creating a class of people "Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, morals and intellect".<sup>5</sup>

English, then became a part in the lingual language education and was widely spread in India. Many distinguished universities were established. The mere establishment of the universities laid the founding stone of the idea of establishing English medium schools and colleges. When the British government realized that the language is gaining much importance and it is educating the people and they are gaining knowledge, they decided to remove the teaching of English for higher education but this led to a chaotic situation. when Lord Curzon, the then viceroy of India, saw this, he ordered to squash the proposal. At the Shimla conference, he said;

" It would be a place for the dissemination of knowledge and encouragement of learning and it further be a human smithy where character was forged in the furnace of experience, and beaten out on the anvil of truth"<sup>6</sup>

The above quote of the then viceroy of India means that educational institutions should be a place where people are exposed to more knowledge to build their characters. Mahatma Gandhi was not against learning English. He protested against the much support of English education, their manners and lifestyles but he appreciated all foreign languages, especially English.

In 1921, English was used as a medium of communication in middle and higher schools. The ministers who were in charge of the education department made the vernacular languages as the natural media of instruction but in secondary and higher levels, English continued to dominate. ' All the avenues of success could be opened only with the keys of English'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the "status of English" in Indian Educational system throughout the British rule, as A.K. Sharma observes, "was enviable"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sharp Henry(1920) 'Selections from Educational Records', Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, page 81-83

<sup>5</sup> The Status of English Language in India, chapter-2, page-7

<sup>6</sup> Sharma Kumar Ram(1989) 'Problems and Solutions of Teaching English', India, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, page-7.

<sup>7</sup> The Status of English Language in India, chapter-2, page-11

<sup>8</sup> Sharma A.K., (1985) ' Aspects of English Language Teaching in India', Bhagalpur: Bharat Book Depot, page-31

## 2.2 Post Independence Period.

English, then, became the language of the industrialization and modernization and now it is the language of globalization. According to Scrase's remarks,

" English is recognized as an important global or international language, essential for professional employment and significantly, a key component of the cultural capital of the middle class Indians"<sup>9</sup>

English, which when introduced, was only the language of the rulers and in the initial days was opposed by the ruled, was now turning on to be the language of the higher class people. They accepted the language economically as they were considered as the " socially progressive class of the Indian society during the post-independence period."<sup>10</sup> English remained as a foreign language in India for less time period as it soon gained the status of second language.

Prof. V.V. Yardi very evidently shows the distinction between English being the foreign language and English being the second language;

" English as a foreign language refers to a situation where it is taught for certain specific purposes viz... reading scientific works, translation communication at certain levels and for certain purposes only. English as a 'second' language refers to a situation where English is used widely for purposes of administration, education and as a common link-language".<sup>11</sup>

From the above words of Prof. V.V.Yardi, it is quite evident that earlier, English was used by a limited number of people for definite purposes. But gradually its importance increased with the foundation of universities, schools and colleges. Still after getting independence, English was taught in few schools and colleges in the beginning. But later on when people understood the importance of the language that it could lead to getting opportunities of well paid jobs, slowly more people adopted the language and its status shifted. The language became an important link between national and international purposes. Despite of many people's hard efforts of making Hindi as the link, it was opposed by people residing in Southern states and so Hindi in 'Deonagari' script was declared as the subsidiary official language besides English also being the subsidiary official language. It was decided that either Hindi or English can be used for Parliamentary proceedings. Many states acknowledges the growing importance of English and gave it a respectable position by making it a compulsory language in the education field.

English thus became the primary requirement for interconnectedness of people, for free exchange of ideas, cultures and economies and a 'lingua Franca' for communication, business and education.<sup>12</sup>

There was an increase in the number of English journals, newspapers and magazines published. It was similar to the

<sup>9</sup> Scrase, Timothy, J., (2004) 'The Hegemony of English in India' a paper presented in the 15th Biennial conference of the Asian studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July, P. 2

<sup>10</sup> Status of English Language in India, chapter-2, page -11

<sup>11</sup> Yardi V.V.,(1977) reprint-2009 ' Teaching English in India today', Aurangabad: Saket Prakashan, Pp.18,19.

<sup>12</sup> The status of English Language in India, chapter-2, page-14

number of Hindi newspapers circulated. This meant that the number of readers increased and thus the language was slowly being accepted by everyone.

Even today, English acts as an indispensable link language. Now a days, knowing English means being better educated, intelligent and belonging from a good culture. The language which was earlier imposed has now become a part of the day to day lives of the common people.

### III. STATUS OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE IN STATE SCHOOL

Concentrating the research work on West Bengal, it is found that the status of English in West Bengal schools is not good. In most of the state schools, not much importance is given to English. Just to enhance the quality of education, the three language system was introduced in most of the schools. According to the recommendation given by the education ministers in the conference held in 1957, there should be English present as a compulsory language in both primary and higher level as students should be given adequate knowledge of English so that they can receive education in university level because the students who do not have a good English base find it difficult in coping up with the university level syllabus.

According to an interview taken of Ms. Shinjini Ghosh, a student of, St. John's Diocesan Girl's higher secondary school, West Bengal,

" The status of English in state schools in West Bengal is not good. Most students of state boards have problem to communicate with students of other boards because of their fluency in English. In my school more preference is given to Bengali or Hindi up to class 8. From 9 onwards we are given an option to opt for English as our first language but still the faculty is not so good and more emphasis is given on Bengali or Hindi as first language. The time period when it time to make the base of English strong, at that point we have English as our vernacular or second language and Bengali or Hindi as our first language. In my opinion, there should be more emphasis on English because now this language has got a worldwide acceptance as the common language which everybody understands."

According to a research, it was found that in 1993, there were nearly 42.26% of primary schools having Hindi as their medium of instruction and only 4.99% having English as their medium of instruction. In the year 2002, there were 46.79% of primary schools having Hindi as their medium of instruction and 12.98% as English as their medium of instruction. In this data, it is seen that Hindi was more used as a medium of Instruction than English for primary schools but the same rate is seen in upper primary and secondary level of state schools. In 2002, 41.32% of secondary schools had Hindi as their medium of instruction and 25.84% of secondary schools had English as their medium of instruction.<sup>13</sup> But now a days, English has taken the importance of other vernacular languages which they had in earlier days.

It is interesting to note that the number of states which offer education at primary and upper primary levels through the

medium of languages other than some states the majority increased their language.

In Andhra Pradesh, English is the third language. Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala and West Bengal has English as their second language.

Thus, its high time to realize the importance of English education in state schools so that the students of these schools can also get the grip of English and the status of English can also increase in the state schools because now a days, English is very essential for communication. Presently English is considered as a status symbol and so it is very necessary to educate the young generation so as to increase the standard of living by getting good jobs.

### IV. IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN STATE SCHOOLS

The language, English occupies a huge space in the area of languages. This language is presently, very much in demand. People even go to English spoken classes, held by some tutorials for learning English. More than having the interest to learn a new language they simply want to show their class and upgrade their status. English has become such a language which reveals the status of the person and the people who cannot speak proper English are looked down upon. Therefore, it is important to have a good grip over the language and a good knowledge of that language. Further English is like clapping. Nothing happens from one side. It has to be a two way process. There should be encouragement from the guardian's side and enthusiasm from the student's side to learn the language. Certain family still has a negative perspective towards English. They feel that their regional language is being neglected and so they prefer their children to study in state schools so that he or she has a good knowledge about their own state language but they fail to understand that now a days learning English is more important than learning their own regional language because other people may not understand that local language. But every literate person is expected to know English so to communicate properly with other people. Like if a person comes to Assam or West Bengal to pursue higher studies, it cannot be expected that he will know Bengali or Assamese language. So the common language in which he can think of speaking is English which more or less a number of people will understand. In fact in India, still the other vernacular languages can help to communicate but it will not suffice in western states like US, UK, America, etc. They people understand only English plus without English one cannot get a good and higher education because in most of the colleges and universities the medium of communication is English. Students belonging from state schools face problem in communicating and understanding text materials which are in English. The language, English, enhances the ability to comprehend and interpret the language of the text book, helps in writing English to complete class assignments and follow what is taught in classes.

<sup>13</sup> NCERT - 2007 cited in Hywel Coleman (2011), page 75.

## V. MERITS OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE IN STATE SCHOOLS

English is such a language which has been mandatory to be taught in all schools as first language. But at the same time it is not fair to look down upon the regional languages. As India is a land of culture, there should be importance of their local language. As the researcher has taken the state schools of West Bengal, so the sources and interview taken of students will only be regarding the state board schools of West Bengal.

The first merit which was founded from the sources is that schools having regional language as their first language give more importance to that language. They prefer their Indian language more than they prefer western languages. This gives respect and increases the respect of local languages to foreign languages.

Secondly, having local languages as first language means preserving the culture of the country and not totally adapting the western culture. The schools which has English as second language preserves the rich language culture of its old local language. Now a days Shakespeare is given more importance than Rabindranath Tagore. Earlier, the interest taken on the poems of rich literary Bengali works of Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, Jibanananda Das, Jatindromohan Bagchi, Sukanta Bhattacharya the interest has shifted to western poets like Wilfred Owen, Robert Frost, Robert Browning, John Claire and others. There are even famous Hindi Poets like Surdas, Kabir, Tulsidas, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Mahadevi Verma, Sumitranandan Pant, Jaishankar Prasad whose poetries are losing its importance is exhausting now a days because of the influence of the western culture and its languages.

Thirdly, having local languages as first language means it promotes regional interests. promotion of regional interests means it promotes the culture of the region through different scriptures. Sociologically the identity of the people residing there is restored. Many people are known through the local language, like, in Bengal, the people residing there, most of them are called Bengali as per the language prevailing there. It is hence their identity.

Fourthly, it restores the integrity of the region. recognizing the regional language means promoting the basic human rights of the people and allowing them to exercise those rights.

For example, East Pakistan(now Bangladesh) fought against West Pakistan because they opposed the East Pakistanis to communicate in their own language, Bengali. These languages are the identity of the people. through different language we understand from which state a person belongs. The different language of different states beautify the country. It is interesting to note that how languages are interlinked. Like for example, Oriya is a mixture of Bengali and Hindi Language, Assamese is almost same as Bengali with few variations, Marwari is a type of Hindi language but with different style of speaking and so on.

It is quite obvious that English should not be a second language in state schools but everything has a positive side too. It is just the wait for everyone to open their eyes and see things from a broader mind and perspectives. Then even in the worst of the things, there will be a tinge of spark of at least one good thing.

## VI. DEMERITS OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE IN STATE SCHOOLS.

Everything in this world has an advantage as well as disadvantage. In this topic too, it can be seen from the other angle. Other local regional language, though having many valid reasons to be the first language in state schools still English should be the first language. The inconvenience caused to the students if English is the second language are jotted down below. Firstly, it is a great barrier in communication. Students from state board schools do not have a good grip over English and even if they can write they are not comfortable in speaking. This causes hamper in communication. these students cannot exchange words or ideas with other people because of their lack in English knowledge.

Secondly, it causes problem in higher education. many students of state school aspire of becoming something eminent in life. But due to lack of this language they fail to do so because most colleges and universities have English as their medium of instruction and have books written in English.

Though students are taught English as a subject but then it can't enhance their knowledge if all the subjects are written and taught in Bengali or Hindi.

Thirdly, it causes problem in language. It is quite obvious that if a person does not have a good grip on the respective language then definitely he will fall short of words while expressing his views thus leading to inappropriate language.

Fourthly, as English is considered as the second language in some state schools, not much attention is paid towards the subjects in state board schools. Still some of the well established schools in West Bengal like South Point, The BSS school, Carmel, St.Lawrence, etc are English medium though they have English as their second language. the students of these schools have a grip in English but in government schools like Kamala girls high school where the medium of communication is Hindi or Bengali, there the students are not affluent in English and most of them cannot speak English. they only have a subject English but all other subjects are taught in the vernacular language which in either Hindi or Bengali in West Bengal.

Moreover the English syllabus of the state schools comprises paragraphs, comprehension and grammar. The standard of these are very basic as compared to the standard of other board and therefore the subject is not paid more attention.

According to the interview taken of Ms. Radhika Chakravarty, a student of South Point,

" I am a student of South Point school. We have English as our second language till class 8 and after that we are given option of having English as our first language. but this affects the students very much because we didn't have English in the lower classes when it was needed to build the base of that subject. As a result we are not so affluent enough with the subject. Moreover, as I study in state board it gives more preference to its local language and treats English just as any other language but it is not enough because English now is an officially accepted language and a language which more or less everybody will understand. I think English should be made the first language in state schools."

## VII. CONCLUSION

Based on the study of some interviews taken and other sources, it can be asserted that English should be the first language in state schools. Though it is the language of the colonials but in the present world it can be said that this language writes our future. In the 21st century, knowing this language is as important as prospering in this world of race. For any higher education, this language is very important as all the books are also available in this language.

English schools still holds a place of prestige in the country and in West Bengal too. Added to it is the hope of better prospects if English is learnt well. Naturally if the parents are made aware of the benefits of knowing English, they will be eager to send their wards to school where English is taught well.<sup>14</sup>

In summing up, it can be said that English got introduced in India with the intrusion of the British. English in India at that juncture might have been a foreign language, but in recent times

It has acquired a distinct identity. Now-a-days there has been a distinct change in the attitude of both Indian and Western people towards Indian English. As the world is getting globalized, there has also been a sense of English language, not just a language of the USA or the UK.. Prior to 1947, it was the language politically imposed on Indian minds. After independence, however, it was realized that English had much deeper roots in India, than in the British Raj. Today the anti-English spirit or English hatred is seen diminished as the language is perceived as language of hope and better life. Indians in different contexts are more likely to have witnessed, or experienced benefits of having more competence in English than before.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the topic has been seen from three different perspectives-the pre-independence period, the post-independence period and the present period starting from the British rule to the present. considering the present scenario in West Bengal, it can be concluded that the status of English as second language in state schools bars the students from having a good grip over the language because the subject is neglected when its position comes in the second place and in the present world where English is an officially accepted language and very important a language to prosper, it should be made the first language.

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