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Cultural Dimension of English Language Teaching in India: A Historical Study

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Abstract

Language teaching in general and English Language Teaching in particular is not a neutral activity rather it has a socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions because language is not neutral because it expresses and creates categories of thought that are shared by members of a social group and hence responsible for the attitudes and beliefs that constitute what we call culture. As language is not neutral, it requires a careful planning at the social, national, and even international level. In any given society or nation the language planning is very closely associated with the ideological, economic and political requirements of the privileged group. This paper charts how English language teaching is determined not by the national or cultural identity rather by the specific requirements of the privileged sections that become synonymous with culture and nation therefore whatever suites to maintain their hegemony in all spheres is termed as national interest. Similarly the teaching of English in India is also not determined by any national and cultural interest as propounded by Indian upper caste scholars located in Indian and Western academic spaces rather it is motivated by the interests of the privileged castes and classes therefore whenever English language teaching and learning consolidates their hegemony they support English language teaching and whenever it seems to threaten their hegemony they oppose it.

This paper looks into the historicity of language policies along with the relationship between language, culture, ideology, and politics. Therefore, language is not just a means of communication rather it is a place for cultural politics that is why whenever a dominant language feels threatened by the growth of other languages, its speakers try to block other languages by raising laws against other languages.

Keywords: linguistic toleration, language, culture, ideology, politics, cultural politics, language planning, communication skills, colonial legacies to neo-colonial futures, linguistic imperialism, internal colonization, ELT policy-makers

Language both expresses and creates categories of thought that are shared by members of a social group and hence responsible for the attitudes and beliefs that constitute what we call culture. Neither language nor culture is neutral; both of them are planned, according to certain ideology, economic and political requirements of the privileged group. Language planning is as ancient as language itself ever since it is expending and is used for many different purposes.

In the third Century BC Emperor, Ashoka pursued political unification through linguistic toleration while Qin Shihuangdi, first emperor of a united China, suppressed regional scripts, selecting a single standardized variety and mandating its use. These ancient precedents have modern manifestations. India's constitution continues Ashoka's pluralism on the other hand, in China's they follow unitary policy. Similarly West also exhibits same trend in language planning.

The relationship between language, culture, ideology, and politics is established by Plato when he advocated free literacy to counter communal poetic recitation aiming to "break the power base of Homer and traditional culture" (Gee: 32) believing that through dialogic language. Athenians might be "disenchanted" from the blandishments of Homeric verse and its dangerous "magic" that made people pliable and unthinking. Similarly, the European language academies aimed to cultivate prestigious literary culture, but also laid the basis for subsequent national politics. Cultivated literary languages merged with the idea of national culture.

Language is not just a means of communication rather it is a place for cultural politics that is why whenever a dominant language feels threatened by the growth of other languages, its speakers try to block other languages by raising laws against other languages. For instance in USA; the growth in the number of Hispanic speakers prompted a major protectionist movement by advocating "only English" linguistic situation. The authorities in USA were quick to realize that "Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition structure or functional allocation of their language codes" (Cooper: 45). Ruling elite always fears this kind of switch over from one language to another because it brings out changes in perception of reality and outlook of masses that may dethrone the ruling elite with the passage of time.

People need languages for communication purpose and apparently, there seems to be no role of ideology, but control over language is the pre-condition for the establishment of hegemony, therefore language planning is "the combination of official decisions and prevailing public practices related to language education and use" (McGroarty:1). The policies adopted for language maintenance many a times convert language into a socioeconomic resource, which has a market value. The same process is happening in the Third World where English has been converted into a socioeconomic resource that provides income as well as social prestige to the people who are well versed in this language. This conversion of English into a socio-economic asset has resulted in the mushrooming of so many institutions for teaching communication skills.

This undue importance given to communication skills that stands for proficiency only in English helps the privileged classes of Third World that have already become Anglicized to ensure top posts for themselves. There is a pertinent question why in a Nation where English speaking population forms only a fraction, it is mandatory that engineers, doctors, computer professionals, managers etc. who have to deal with non-English knowing common masses, and many a times even their bosses too are not well versed in English, must be proficient in English Language.

The forces ranging from colonial legacies to neo-colonial futures to historical reality of internal colonial tendencies to the third world have played a major role in centralizing and marginalizing English in Indian context. In the age of neo-colonialism, socioeconomic and political domination of English speaking First World makes it a central force that persuades the members of peripheral population to opt for education in center's language and promote it for their fellow citizens. It means that they have been co-opted into linguistic imperialism and serves the dominating forces by becoming internal colonists. However, the ruling elite of the Third World in general and India in particular has started advocating for the promotion of the regional languages for the marginal sections that they themselves do not use. They do so because in a country like India that has a long colonial history, English is the Key to getting top-most bureaucratic positions and due to promotion of English at lower level has created a competition for the elite class because the people from marginal sections once educated in English start giving tough competition. Therefore, the recent promotion of regional language has nothing to with nationalism or preserving cultural identity rather it is a part of internal colonial system. As one of the most powerful tools of linguistic imperialism according to Phillipson is language teaching and it occurs when, "priority is given in teacher training, curriculum development, and school timetables to one language" (Phillipson: 47). A survey of the Third World reveals that most of the educationists have become internal colonist; the efforts to promote English language skills and even the effort to promote regional languages is part of internal colonization because the promoters do not use those languages themselves.

Therefore, the internal colonialism and neo-colonialism are collaborating with each other in establishing the hegemony over the marginalized sections all over the world by provoking them to worry about their cultural and linguistic identities. However, before promoting any particular language, before framing its syllabus, teaching methodology etc. it is necessary to understand that:

> Education is not simply a technical business of well managed information processing, nor even simply a matter of applying "learning theories" to the classroom or using the results of subject-centered "achievement testing". It is a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture (Burner: 33).

The advocates of English language teaching often complaint that there is a lot of resistance against this language, they need to understand that language teaching especially when it is a foreign language, involves so many complex issues, because language is directly linked to identity, which is also a complex issue. The struggle for the maintenance of identity is not only to be understood in inter-cultural terms: there is also an intra-cultural dimension. Quite apart from whether or not groups stand in fear of neighboring culture, there exists the difficulty of preserving valued traditions in a world increasingly full of homogenizing pressures. English serves a very complex purpose in the Third World in general and India in particular because the promotion of English Language and resistance to English language are both connected infernal colonialism, which in turn is linked with the international colonialism.

While describing the spread of languages Saussure refers to two conflicting tendencies, *la forced' intercourse* and *I' esprit de clocher* when he says:

> The laws that govern the spread of linguistic phenomena are the same as those that govern any custom whatsoever, e.g., fashion. In every human collectivity two forces are always working simultaneously and in opposing directions: individualism or provincialism (*esprit de clocher*) on the one hand and intercourse – communication among men – on the other. (Saussure: 205-06).

The individuality here refers to identity of a nation, culture or a social group. If a nation wishes to preserve its uniqueness or to establish its presence, and to avoid being an anonymous ingredient in a cultural melting pot, then it must search for ways of expressing its difference from the rest of the world. Flags, uniforms, and other such symbols have their place, but nothing is propagated as naturally and universally present as a national language – or, if there is none, a natural variety or an international language. However, the very idea of a national language and the strong presence of English and equally strong resistance to it in a multi-lingual country like India is problematic because the things are very complex due to internal colonization.

The colonial dominance destroyed the native languages of colonies as professed by Thomas de Quincey that English is, "traveling fast towards its ultimate mission of eating up like Aaron's rod, all other languages" (Mukherjee: 23). However English is not the only language that destroys the regional languages the national languages in the newly independent nations are also doing the same thing. As a result of English linguistic imperialism along with National languages out of 6000 or so languages in the world, it seems probable that about half of these will disappear or be sidelined in the course of the present century, an average of one language out of every two week. Under these circumstances instead of the native languages, the post-colonial world is ruled by native varieties of English such as Indian English, American English, Australian English, Canadian English etc. While formulating the policy for language teaching, Marx's discourse on language should be kept in mind that "Language is as old as consciousness--language is practical conscious that exists also for other men, …language like consciousness, only arise from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.... (Prawer: 112).

However, it is not the only reason for which a language exists. Sometimes, a particular language is promoted and canonized to exclude others. In such cases, instead of facilitating communication, it limits the communication only to the privileged classes, which are always happy to have a language of their own, which is projected as a language of universal significance, and, of knowledge, enlightenment, science and technology. Use of this language provides them a special place in society because the under privileged classes, who cannot understand or understand only partially, as they are not given a proper opportunity to learn that language, considers them highly enlightened. Kancha Ilaiah, points out no language can serve the underprivileged unless until it becomes a carrier of their feelings and sentiments, as he says:

> What difference did it make to us whether we had an English textbook that talked about Milton's *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Regained*, or Shakespeare's *Othello* or *Macbeth* or Wordsworth's poetry about nature in England, or a Telgu text book which talked about Kalidasa's *Meghasandesham*, Bommer Pottana's *Bhagvatam*, or Nannaya and Tikkana's *Mahabharatam* except the fact that one text book is written with 26 letters and the other in 56 letters? We do not share the contents of either; we do not find our lives reflected in their narratives. We cannot locate our family settings in them. In none of these books do we find words that are familiar to us. Without the help of dictionary neither makes any sense to us. How does it make any difference to us whether it is Greek and Latin that are written in Roman letters or Sanskrit (Ilaiah: 15).

The way English language is taught in India reflects the same situation, most of the Indians, who learn English up to graduation and in many cases even up to post-graduation fail to "find words that are familiar" to them. In this era of globalization, most of the Universities and other educational institutes teach English in the name of "Communication Skills". This languages policy at one level projects that English is the only medium of communication in India. On another level the pedagogy adopted for teaching of English, teach words, phrases and structures, which never become a medium of sentiments and feeling, the learners though speak in English, they can be happy, sad, angry, nervous and frustrated only in their mother tongues. It is so because the linguistic methods teach strings of words that form well-worn patterns, coercing their users to think in certain ways. Starting with words is likelier to produce abstract thinking, which is likened to "invasion of one's mind" by Orwell when he says, "This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases...anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain (Joseph: 351).

This detachment of language from observable reality makes it possible for capitalist powers, which are transformations of monarchy and feudalism, to maintain orthodoxy among their subjects who also acts as active carriers of their ideology and in this way dupe those they wish to enslave.

If a language is taught in a way that prevents concrete mental pictures from being called up, people will not understand what is happening to them and they cannot rebel against what they do not understand. The entire apparatuses of "Teaching communicative English" is producing the English speaking parrots, who speak it the whole day but fail to express themselves. Now the question arises if the ability of speaking in English be considered an extra qualification for a parrot? Undoubtedly, it is a qualification from the point of view of the domesticator, but from the point of view of the parrot, it is an extra burden unless until it leads to clear thinking by bringing in mental images, visualizing things and then finding words to describe them. However, the ELT policy makers do not seem to understand this fact as Phillipson says:

> The ELT policy-makers themselves in Center and Periphery, in Ministries of Education, Universities, curriculum development centers and the like are part of a hegemonic structures…The structure of academic imperialism has ensured that Center training and expertise have been disseminated worldwide, with change and innovative professionalism tending to be generated by the Center (Phillipson: 305).

The process of Globalization that rests more on the needs of the capitalistic powers than common people has been turning its subjects into refugees by uprooting them from their native places and transplanting (temporarily) them in the alien lands. As P. Sainth considers Globalization that is propelled by market forces a destroyer of human lives when he says:

> Market fundamentalism destroys more human lives than any other simply because it cuts across all national, cultural, geographic, religious and other boundaries. It's as much at home in Moscow as in Mumbai or Minnesota...It sits as easily in Hindu, Islamic or Christian societies. And it contributes angry; despairing recruits to the armies of all religious fundamentalism. Based on the premise that the market is the solution to all the problems of the human race, it is too, a very religious fundamentalism. It has its own Gospel: The Gospel of St. Growth, of St. Choice... (Loomba: 218).

The "Market fundamentalism" has affected human lives along with the language and has rendered the concept of mother tongue invalid. Now everyone is in market and moving from place to place like a commodity. Neither they have a motherland nor they have a mother tongue, therefore much of world's verbal

communication takes place by means of languages, which are not the user's mother tongue, but their second, third, or n^{th} language, acquired one way or another and used when appropriate.

During colonial era, English was the language of colonialism later on it was adopted by the capitalistic powers and projected as the language of professional success; in the era of Globalization it is imposed on the world in a very subtle way. There is nothing wrong in learning any language other than the mother tongue, but the way English is taught and learnt under various sub-heads such as--Communication Skills, Business English, Functional English etc. – is different from second language acquisition because:

> If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources (Norton: 10).

Subject matter and the methodology adopted for teaching of English communication skills do not fulfill this criterion. Various English language testing courses designed by English Speaking Center such as IELTS and TOEFL on the one hand, and the courses designed by Third World institutions to test English language skills have been responsible for the global spread of English in recent decades and for monolingual and Anglo-centric professionalism, that has accompanied its teaching worldwide. However, very ironically in most of the cases these courses fail to provide "a wider range of symbolic and material resources" to the learners.

In the present era when the Nation States have been weakened by free and open markets that dissolve the international boundaries both on the geo-political and psychological levels, the market forces determine the use of languages. The main motto of these market forces is to make maximum profit; therefore, they do not care for any particular language, for them if using British English can sell goods and services, then let British English be used. If it needs American English, then so it be. In addition, let either of others be employed as occasion demands. Sometimes they promote English; sometimes regional languages but the only aim is the maximum profit.

A survey of English Literature and Movies available in India can prove this point. More copies of Hindi or Regional Languages translation of an English novel, or English movies are sold than their English version. It is so because the market forces know that if they want to sell their linguistic product like texts and movies they must keep the consumer's proficiency and ability to understand both connotative and denotative aspects of language in mind.

Though apparently it seems that the capitalistic market forces control everything, it is not the case a language has a very close relationship with culture and nation as enunciated by German philosopher Johann Herder through the equation: One language = One folk = One nation, he further extends his theory and says:

> If it be true that we learn to think through words, then language is what defines and delineates the whole of human knowledge...In everyday life, it is clear that to think is almost nothing else but to speak. Every nation speaks...according to the way it thinks and thinks according to the way it speaks (Kramsch: 236).

As English has emerged a global language due to colonial rule and the world cannot do without it therefore it should be adapted to the native circumstance, so that instead of becoming an instrument in the hands of imperial forces it can become a voice for that particular nation or culture. There must not be undue stress on the communication skills rather language should be taught through literature in English especially by the native writers, and be related to the real life and converted into a source that gives them "access to hitherto unattainable resources" of knowledge so that it can become a carrier of native culture and experience as Chinua Achebe says:

> "…for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and intend to use it.... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Achebe: 103).

Following this course English can be de-colonized and can be transformed into a language of masses that is capable of expressing their emotions as well as their intellectual and practical thoughts. However, at the same time it is necessary to save it from being lost into obscurity and unintelligibility due to local changes in vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation because then it will lose its international acceptability.

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