

The Status and Role of English language in Contemporary Times: A Paradox of Demand and Mistrust

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of English language in the global context as well as within India and explores the love-hate status that it has been accorded by linguists, scholars and researchers over the years. On the one hand, English, a widely used language in science, technology and commerce serves as a lingua franca and is perceived as the language of opportunity and upward social mobility. On the other, it is seen as a potent threat to local languages and is condemned as the weapon of the rich and the elite to maintain the status-quo. The author examines different views towards English language and concludes by advocating multilingualism as an effective resource in a language classroom to encourage in learners a simultaneous acquisition of several languages.

Keywords: *Linguafranca, Language of opportunity, Acquisition, Language classroom, Multilingualism*

English as the Global Language: A Double-Edged Sword?

While defining the term global language, Halliday (2006, p. 342) writes that a global language is a “tongue” which transcends “its region to become national” or a “tongue” which transcends “its nation to become international; it is taken over, as second tongue, by speakers of other languages.” Moreover, Halliday (as quoted in Briguglio and Watson, 2014) highlights the current position of English as the global language when he states:

The way it has turned out, English has become a world language in both senses of the term, international and global: international as a medium of literary and other cultural life; global, as the co-genitor of the new

technological age, the age of information [...] That was not the case 50 years ago and it may well not be the case 50 years from now; but for the moment, that is how it is.(p. 16)

The question to be pondered over is why and how did English acquire this status? According to Crystal (1997), English was “apparently at the right place at the right time.” Elaborating on this point, he goes on to say:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading country...British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, during the nineteenth century, so that it was a language 'on which the sun never sets.' During the twentieth century, this world presence was maintained and promoted almost single-handedly through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower. Economics replaced politics as the chief driving force. And the language behind the US dollar was English.(p. 10)

In the present context, where economic liberalization and cultural globalization have transformed the world into a global village, English has emerged as the undisputed lingua franca of the world. In recent times, the term 'English as a lingua franca' has been used to refer to the interaction in English between non-native speakers of English who neither have a common tongue nor a common culture, and for whom English is the preferred foreign language of communication (Firth, 1996). The internationalization of economy has resulted in innumerable multicultural and multilingual workplaces which, in turn, have impacted professional communication in several ways (Schnurr, 2012). This includes the use of English and other languages as the link language in intercultural exchanges. The major factors that have contributed to the growth of English have been its wide use in science, technology and commerce; the flexibility of the English language to assimilate vocabulary from other languages; and the existence of numerous English dialects. Moreover, every country that has used English for formal and informal exchanges has incorporated features of its own language and culture into its usage (Hasman, 2004).

Despite the growing popularity of English as the global language, researchers have written about the threatening impact of English on other languages (Crystal, 2000; Dalby, 2002) apprehending that approximately half of the world's 6000 languages will die due to the “killer language English.” There are

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concerns that the world's linguistic diversity needs to be protected. Addressing this concern, Pennycook (2007, p. 115) advocates the use of English for “communication across boundaries” but opposes the relegation of vernacular languages to local expression and use. He advocates a vision of holistic education wherein there is additional learning of foreign languages, including English, along with the native languages. The unprecedented global impact of English has also been critiqued for its socio-cultural and politico-economic impact on non-English speaking countries. Condemning the widespread use of English, Phillipson (1992) defines it as “English linguistic imperialism” where “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (p. 47). Similarly, English linguistic imperialism is seen as a subtype of “linguicism” and is defined by Skutnabb-Kangas as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (1988, p. 13).

However, several scholars from post-colonial countries have questioned Phillipson's claim of English linguistic imperialism arguing that it should not be over-generalized. According to Bisong (1995) “linguistic imperialism” projects “an imperialistic view” of English language learners and non-native speakers as “passive victims of powerful global processes, thereby failing to acknowledge how English may be used and changed by learners for their own purposes” (p. 129). Many other scholars too have written in support of English as a shared language of communication not necessarily linked to any specific community or region. Widdow son (1998) feels that Standard English is an international language that serves a whole range of different communities and their institutional purposes. He writes:

The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it...It is not a possession which they [native speakers] lease out to others while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.(p. 397)

Similarly, Canagarajah (1999) argues that there is a need to explore various English language teaching voices in the “periphery” language classrooms. He notes that communities might adopt strategies of appropriation to negotiate

“meaning, identity and status in contextually suitable and socially strategic ways” and therein alter “the communicative and linguistic rules of English according to local cultural and ideological imperatives” (p. 76). However, since English is the global language and the necessity of global English is confirmed, it is more important, as Jenkins writes, to look ahead and consider how to make English “more cross-culturally democratic” for all the users worldwide instead of disputing about the “socio-historical inequality in English spread” (2000, p. 4). In a developing economy such as India, some of the trends that seem to be contributing to the increasing use of English include “the growing middle class, increasing urbanisation, widening access to higher education, improved communication and more children attending private schools” (Graddol, 2010, p. 64).

The Status and Role of English in India

It was in 1963 that the Official Languages Act of India laid down that English is to be used for official purposes of the Union as well as in Parliament for an indefinite period of time. From that time onwards to the current times, the role and the status of English language has reached an unprecedented height despite political and socio-cultural opposition from time to time. The urban Indian youth, in particular, “appreciates the association of English with higher education, employment opportunities, social mobility, career advancement and access to knowledge” (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997, p. 142). Other important developments that have led to the exponential growth of English in the second half of the 20th century include the increasing use of computer and Internet Technology in India in all walks of life leading to English being considered “the preferred language of the global information highway- and, consequently, its learning and teaching” (Sheorey, 2006, p. 24). On the other hand, Gupta (2014, pp. 14-15) observes that the rising popularity of English has not really been driven by economic considerations such as the success of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry in India alone. The inclusion of English words and phrases into vernacular languages as evidently manifested in advertisements, popular songs, newspapers etc. along with the growth of Indian fiction in English have also contributed immensely to the growth of English. The *Position Paper of National Focus Group on the Teaching of English* (2006) aptly sums up the popularity of English language in today's context. It says:

English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in

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education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independent India, tailored to higher education (as a “library language”, a “window on the world”), now felt to be insufficiently inclusive socially and linguistically, the current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena. It is predicted that by 2010, a surge in English-language learning will include a third of the world's people (Graddol, 1997). The opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s has coincided with an explosion in the demand for English in our schools because English is perceived to open up opportunities. (Das, 2005, p. 1)

Likewise, the *National Curriculum Framework* (2005), describes the significant role of English as the link language in India by defining it as “a global language in a multilingual country” (p. 38). It recognizes that the teaching of English language has become more like a prerequisite response to meeting people's aspirations than an academic requirement. Thus, it defines the goals for a second-language curriculum as “attainment of a basic proficiency...and the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through (for example) literacy.”It suggests an across-the-curriculum approach in second language curriculum “that breaks down the barriers between English and other subjects, and English and other Indian languages” (p. 39). However, the grass-roots reality of Indian classrooms tells another story. One, most students across India fail to achieve basic proficiency in English leave alone the ability to use it in order to express abstract thought and acquire knowledge. There is a huge disparity between the urban and rural, private and public, vernacular and English-speaking institutions in India, widening the gap between children who can and children who cannot express themselves in English. Second, English language has, by and large, been beyond the reach of the poor and deprived sections of the society. This has been observed in the *National Knowledge Commission Report* (NKC, 2007):

There is an irony in the situation. English has been a part of our education system for more than a century. Yet English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which makes for highly unequal access. Indeed, even now, more than one percent of our people use it as a second language, let alone a first language. But NKC believes that the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. Early

action in this sphere would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society. (p. 47)

Similarly, Agnihotri (2010) draws our attention to English perceived as the language of power when he writes that it is “on the one hand the language of opportunity, social status and upward social mobility and on the other hand, in glove with the processes that consistently enlarge the distance between the elite and the marginalized” (p. 7). Representing one of the disadvantaged groups of the society, Ilaiah, renowned Dalit author-activist, believes that exposure to English will empower the marginalized and bring them at par with the privileged. Observing that the rich had for very long kept the down-trodden away from English language which is the “language of administration and global communication,” he writes that only way of bridging the gap between the affluent and the poor is through English education. According to him, “even if 10% of our children got English education, the intellectual field would have changed...My hope is education, not reservation” (2013, p. 41). However, this notion of English as the language of empowerment is seen as a challenge to India's linguistic diversity by many researchers who advocate a multilingual pedagogical approach in classrooms in order to overcome it. English language curricula, syllabi and materials ought to facilitate contexts of empowerment to students so that they feel equipped to use the language for knowledge construction.

Creating Contexts of Empowerment: Multilingualism as a Resource in the Classroom

Given the different debates surrounding English language and also given the fact that English is widely used in India be it for official purposes, businesses or as the medium of instruction in colleges/schools, the truth that we need to accept is that English is here to stay; and the question that we, as teachers, need to grapple with is what can be done to ensure that learners “learn English, not at the cost of their languages but along with them” (Agnihotri, 2010, p. 11). According to Garcia et al. (2006), a multilingual school/college is a space that “takes into account and builds further on the diversity of languages and literacy practices that children and youth bring” (p. 14). Learners' own languages support teaching and learning of English and the *Position Paper of National Focus Group on the Teaching of English* suggests that teachers must exploit learners' linguistic and cultural resources and adopt a translingual pedagogy in

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an English classroom (2006, pp. 12-13).

Translanguaging views language as a fluid entity and the process of language as a continuous one. Several strategies such as code-switching, code-mixing and translation may be used to promote a multilingual approach in the classroom in place of English-only approach. It is not an uncommon phenomenon for teachers, especially those of us teaching in regional schools or rural settings, to use the local language or to lecture in a bi-lingual mode. However, these practices have been adopted simply to facilitate comprehension or to engage the learners. It is high time that we seriously embrace inclusive learning practices by adopting a multilingual pedagogy so that the learners may acquire English along with several other languages in an environment where their own language(s) and culture(s) are valued and respected which would be instrumental in building their confidence and self-image.

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