

A Critical Examination of India's Language Policy in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India boasts a rich history spanning more than two centuries, yet the persistent struggle of our students with the language raises a perplexing enigma. This paper embarks on an inferential method, aiming to unravel the intricacies of this issue. Its primary focus is a critical examination of our language policy in education, seeking to pinpoint the core of the problem. Taking a perceptive approach, the paper contends that despite the outward appearance of trilingualism, our revered language policy is inherently monolingual. It sheds light on the paradox where, in reality, English holds the position of a mere 'subject' within the curriculum rather than being recognized as a true 'language.' This revelation prompts a profound questioning of the standards set forth by the policy and the efficacy of their intended outcomes. Delving deeper into the crux of the matter, the paper challenges the prevailing norms and perceptions surrounding English education in India. It contends that the current policy framework may be inadvertently contributing to the challenges faced by learners, as it treats English as a compartmentalized subject rather than an integrated language skill. This critique serves as a catalyst for a reevaluation of the objectives and strategies embedded in the existing language policy. In an effort to offer a constructive solution, the paper draws upon an analogous postcolonial society and presents the convergent pedagogy model as a potential remedy to the identified challenges. By proposing an alternative approach to English language education, rooted in a more holistic and integrated perspective, the paper aims to alleviate the plight of learners grappling with the language. This comprehensive exploration endeavors to not only uncover the underlying issues within the current English language education system in India but also to advocate for a paradigm shift in our approach. Through critical analysis and a forward-looking pedagogical proposal, the paper seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on enhancing English language proficiency among Indian students.

Key words: ELT, pedagogy, holistic approach, difficulties of learners, outcomes of the policy etc.

Introduction

The inception of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India dates back to as early as 1780s, and English, as asserted by Sinha (1978, p.80), was deemed the "sine qua non for the scholars, the job seekers, and the affluent in the society." Remarkably, over the course of 235 years, the fundamental role of English in securing opportunities for higher education and employment has endured. English continues to be a prerequisite primarily accessible to the educated and privileged few, but a noteworthy shift has occurred - now, there is a pervasive desire among the masses to 'learn' the language, as described by Annamalai (1992, p. 39), driven by its status as a "profitable commodity."

Paradoxically, despite English being taught for more than two centuries, Aula's observation that only about 30% of the population can speak English to varying degrees reveals a stark reality. This statistic becomes even more ironic when considering that English is introduced at the primary levels in government public schools across India, especially given that these schools cater to the majority of the student population, 23 crore students, according to Dhawan with a privileged 2 crore studying in English mediums. Significantly, the focus of this paper centers on government public schools, as the language policy in education predominantly applies to them.

The primary objective of this paper is to unravel the paradox inherent in the disparity between the prolonged duration of English instruction and the limited proficiency among learners. In pursuit of this goal, the paper probes the term 'language' in English Language Teaching within the Indian context. It contends that a language, inherently a mode of communication, necessitates mastery of all four language skills, Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988). In the case of English acquisition, mastery of these skills should naturally follow. However, a lamentable reality surfaces: English is not taught as a 'language' but rather as a 'subject' in the education system. This outcome is attributed to the prevailing language policy.

Thus, the crux lies in critiquing the existing language policy in education, aiming to pinpoint the root of the problem and subsequently proposing solutions. The paper delves into the disconnect between the intended acquisition of language skills and the prevailing pedagogical approach. By scrutinizing the policy's impact on the teaching of English in government schools, the paper seeks not only to diagnose the issue but also to advocate for a reevaluation of language education practices in order to bridge the gap between intent and outcome.

Review of Literature

The realm of English Language Teaching (ELT) has been extensively explored through various research endeavors, with a predominant focus on identifying the root causes of the persisting challenges. Commonly, the blame has been attributed to factors such as "teachers," "teaching programs," "teaching materials" "classroom practices," and "methodologies" (Kapoor, 1992, p.80). However, a notable gap in the literature becomes apparent, as only two works delve into the treatment of English as a subject without delving deeper into the intricacies of this aspect.

Rajan's (1995) contribution touches upon the notion of "subjecting English," but her emphasis lies beyond the scope of school children, centering more on the 'literature' and 'language' bifurcations that English undergoes in India. Her proposal advocates for replacing English classes with reading classes at the university level, positing that this shift would foster both "critical thinking" and enhanced "language skills." However, a critical gap in her research emerges from the assumption that students have attained a certain higher "level," a hypothetical premise lacking consistency and empirical validation. Moreover, the general English proficiency level of an average college classroom is reported to be subpar, challenging the feasibility of Rajan's proposal.

Shah (1992) contributes to the discourse by addressing the treatment of English as a "content subject" in schools. However, his work is primarily diagnostic in nature, merely highlighting the problem without delving into the broader context of the language policy in education. Furthermore, Shah's work lacks the provision of concrete solutions to address the identified issue.

Thus, while existing research in ELT has diligently identified various factors contributing to the challenges faced in English language education, there remains a significant gap regarding the treatment of English as a subject. The limited depth of exploration into this facet, coupled with a dearth of comprehensive solutions in the identified literature, underscores the need for further research that not only diagnoses the problem but also considers the broader educational policies and offers viable remedies for the challenges within the domain of English language education.

The Indian Language Policy in Education

The excerpt highlights India's language policy, known as the "three language formula," and its impact on the education system. The policy, introduced in 1968, is designed to cover 90% of the Indian population. Despite the linguistic diversity in India, with approximately 122 languages belonging to five different language families, the three-language formula is presented as an impressive and inclusive approach. According to the formula, the first language is the mother tongue or regional language, the second language is the official language of the Union or the associate official language, and the third language is a modern Indian or foreign language not covered under the first two categories.

Research in language acquisition supports the notion that the mother tongue serves as the most effective medium of instruction for young learners. UNESCO emphasizes the importance of using the learners' mother tongue, stating that "the research evidence today clearly shows that using the learners' mother tongue is crucial to effective learning" (UNESCO 2008). In practice, even when the official language is theoretically the medium of instruction, regional dialects are sometimes used in reality. This flexibility aligns with the policy's goal of promoting effective learning.

However, the excerpt points out potential challenges arising from changing socio-cultural dimensions and the forces of globalization. It acknowledges that the prevalence of globalization and democratic ideals necessitates proficiency in international and regional languages. This recognition highlights the evolving demands placed on students to be proficient not only in their mother tongue but also in languages that enable them to engage meaningfully in a globalized world. While the three-language formula aligns with effective language acquisition principles and has succeeded in its practical implementation, there is a recognition of the need for additional language proficiency to meet the demands of a globalized and democratic society. The tension between the traditional emphasis on mother tongue education and the contemporary requirements for proficiency in international languages forms a complex dynamic within India's language policy landscape.

The language policy in education, existing for over half a century, is praised in theory but faces practical challenges. Advocates of the three-language formula, such as Pattanayak (1971), envisioned that its implementation in schools would pave the way for universities to replace

English with regional languages, particularly Sanskrit and Hindi. However, the political elite of that time acknowledged the importance of English, with Gandhi (1921) stating that "the knowledge of English is necessary" for a select few (Zamam, 1984, p.8). English remained a language of the elite, and efforts were made to preserve its exclusivity.

Significant changes occurred with the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, leading to the emergence of multinational companies that provided employment opportunities, particularly for English-speaking individuals. This economic shift resulted in a growing demand for English education, transforming English from a foreign language to a recognized standard variety known as Indian English. The language, once reserved for the elite, became more accessible to the broader population.

While the education policy acknowledges the need for English education, there are notable gaps that need attention and resolution. The changing socio-economic landscape has underscored the practical importance of English proficiency in the job market, prompting a reassessment of the role of English in education. The evolution of Indian English as a standard variety reflects the linguistic adaptability and incorporation of English into the cultural fabric of the nation. Despite the theoretical merits of the language policy, the practical dynamics, including the influence of globalization and economic liberalization, have led to a reevaluation of the role of English in India's education system. Bridging the prevalent gaps in the policy becomes imperative to meet the evolving linguistic and educational needs of the population in the context of a changing socio-economic landscape.

The Educational status of English in India

The 50-year-old language policy in education falls short of meeting the demands and interests of the common people, particularly in the context of the desire to learn English as a language of empowerment. While theoretically, the policy advocates for the teaching of three languages, the practical implementation of the second and third languages is often ineffective. The lack of emphasis on English proficiency becomes apparent, especially when compared to the significant advantages that students from English medium backgrounds enjoy over their regional medium counterparts.

English, in many cases, remains a 'subject' rather than a language for communication, particularly for students from regional medium backgrounds. This undermines the policy's

objective of achieving language proficiency. The stature of English is reduced to that of just another subject in the curriculum, akin to history or physics. Even within English language classrooms, instructions are not consistently given in English, and the teaching methodology, starting with alphabets, contradicts established research on language acquisition, Listening → Speaking → Reading → Writing. (Rivers 1968, p. 51)

The policy, despite its outward appearance as a trilingual one, is critiqued for being essentially monolingual. The majority of schools, especially at the primary and upper primary stages, primarily teach through the children's mother tongue, rendering the education policy more monolingual than trilingual (NCERT 2007). Thus, the language policy in education, despite its long-standing existence, faces significant challenges in fulfilling its intended goals. The practical inadequacies in teaching English, especially for those from regional medium backgrounds, highlight the need for a comprehensive reevaluation of the policy to bridge the gap between theory and implementation, ensuring that English education truly becomes a means of empowerment for all students.

The Pedagogy Model

The case of bilingualism in education, specifically through the use of Pedagogy Convergent, presents an interesting model that bears some similarities to the situation in India. Students commence their education by learning to read and write in their first language, much like the initial emphasis on the mother tongue in India. As they progress to the 5th or 6th grade, the time allocated for language learning is evenly divided between the first and second languages. A distinctive feature of this bilingual education model is that, by the end of primary schooling, both languages are utilized as mediums of instruction. This stage, however, is not consistently achieved in the Indian government schooling system. In contrast, the second language often retains the status of a 'subject,' preventing schools from fully qualifying as bilingual institutions. UNESCO (2008, p.13) underscores that successful bilingual education involves more than just a change in the language of instruction.

English medium private schools in India, on the other hand, align more closely with the principles of bilingual education. These schools introduce English instruction from the primary level, and although initial instructions may be given in the regional language, there is a gradual transition toward an all-English instruction mode. This method allows students to become proficient bilinguals, as the substantial five hours of daily schooling provides ample inputs for English language acquisition. The remaining time spent interacting with parents and friends in their mother tongue further enhances proficiency in their first language (L1).

Thus, the comparison between the bilingual education model and the situation in India, particularly in English medium private schools, highlights the potential for success when bilingualism is integrated effectively into the education system. The emphasis on both languages as mediums of instruction and the gradual transition toward bilingual proficiency contribute to a more comprehensive and successful bilingual education approach.

The Difficulty of English in India

The comparative studies conducted by researchers such as Mamta (2006) and Suresh (2006) between students of government schools and private English medium schools reveal a significant and persistent gap in the standards of written English between the two groups. Mamta (2006, p.217) specifically points out the deplorable condition of English produced by students of government schools and emphasizes the need for "some radical changes in the present education system, English language teaching in particular should be necessary." These stark findings about the declining standards of English in government regional medium schools raise fundamental questions about what the language policy aims to achieve and what standard of English it expects its subjects to produce. A glimpse into the National Achievement Survey (NAS) report is instructive, as it claims to conduct a "Health Check" to the education system, analyzing achievement based on various background factors.

However, what stands out is the absence of tests evaluating writing skills or communication skills in the English language test conducted for classes 3 and 8 across the country. The focus was on testing listening, speaking, reading, and comprehending skills. The

omission of assessments for writing and communication skills suggests that the celebrated language policy may not place a strong emphasis on students possessing these abilities, even after studying English for several years in school. The inference drawn from this omission is significant: the language policy may not expect students to have proficient writing or communicative abilities even after a substantial period of studying English in school. Consequently, when these students pursue higher studies, they may struggle to produce error-free English, as evidenced by numerous studies in Error Analysis in the Indian context. This gap in language proficiency has implications for students' academic and professional endeavors, emphasizing the need for a reevaluation of language teaching strategies and policy goals.

Conclusion

The language policy in India requires amendments, particularly in the context of English language teaching. Changes in language teaching methodology may have limited impact as long as English continues to occupy the position of a 'subject' in the schooling system. Significant improvements in students' English proficiency are unlikely without addressing the fundamental issue of how English is treated in the curriculum. To bring about positive changes, introducing English from the very first year of schooling and using it as a language in at least half of the textbooks could work wonders. The crucial shift needed is to treat English not merely as a 'subject' but as a 'language.' This shift in perspective is essential for creating an environment that fosters language acquisition rather than treating English education as an isolated academic pursuit. Highly trained teachers and professionally developed teaching materials can contribute significantly, but their impact is limited if constrained by the current time limitations, such as one period per day. Language education can draw inspiration from the effective use of literature as a "tool" and extend this approach to other subjects, including social sciences and sciences.

The formula for language acquisition is straightforward: the more input students receive, the better their output. By redefining the role of English within the education system and integrating it more seamlessly into the curriculum, policymakers can create an environment that facilitates comprehensive language acquisition. Ultimately, treating English as a language rather than a subject will be essential for addressing the challenges students face in mastering the language and ensuring their proficiency in communication.

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