

A Study on the Genesis of English as a Second Language at Lower Primary Level in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview of historical developments of ESL (English as a second language) at lower primary level in West Bengal. An enriched practice of English education was experienced in West Bengal for its historical reasons. Being the capital of India, Kolkata was the epic centre for the learning of English language. That culture of learning was disseminated throughout the Bengal at the very grass root level. And consequently, after the independence of India, English has evolved as a second language. But in West Bengal, the experience was little bit different. The Left Front Government saddened it during their thirty-four years rule. The two decades of Left rule, from 1983 to 2004, viewed four changes in the scenario of teaching English at school at irregular intervals without proper reason. The purpose of this intervention - a lowering of the existing academic standards - was to make primary education more accessible, particularly for poorer and rural children, who at that time had low enrolment and high dropout rates. English education has persisted a contested terrain of hegemonies and counter hegemonies since its inception during the colonial period, after Independence in entire India and in Left ruled West Bengal too. Despite of its pro-proletariat ideology, the then Government did a setback when it reintroduced English in the Primary stage after initially abolishing it from there. They even failed to produce any revolutionary ideal in the English textbooks. Globalization and ideological confusions are chiefly responsible for the vagueness of the English education policies. But, from 2004 onwards English was established permanently as a full fledged second language at lower primary level in West Bengal.

Keywords: Colonization, English Education, ESL, Globalization, Hegemony, Ideology.

Introduction

In a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country like India, English is one of the prime communicative languages. It is a sole means of interaction both nationally and internationally. That is why English is termed as lingua franca. Besides, teaching English in primary school is a worldwide phenomenon. So, the initiation of teaching English has received a great attention in India. More specifically, in West Bengal it has been introduced responding to people's aspirations. The fulfilment of basic proficiency and fluency, as attained in natural language learning and development language into a means of knowledge acquisition, are the two main purposes behind the implementation of English language learning at primary level. Unfortunately, the policy of teaching and learning process of English in West Bengal at primary level is unable to fulfil the aspirations of the learners.

An attempt has been made in this study to investigate the genesis of English in West Bengal. The status of English both in pre and post-independence period in West Bengal have been highlighted. The reports of various committees' commissions regarding English have been discussed in the study. And also, a detailed study has been performed regarding previous as well as present practices and perspectives of English as a second language at lower primary level in West Bengal.

A Brief Note on the Pre-Independence History of English Language in West Bengal

Firstly, British educationists and missionaries took an active interest in education in India and helped establish institutions for studying oriental languages as well as English and other European languages. By this time, Bengal, especially Calcutta, had become the seat of British administration and this turned it into a hub of educational institutions. Some of the most prominent institutions that came up include the Asiatic Society (1784), the Calcutta Madrasa (1781, promoting education for Muslims), Fort William College (1800), the Hindoo College (1817, later renamed as the Presidency College) and private schools such as the Hindoo School (1817) and the Hare School (1818) (Dutta 2002: 48-52). The first English printing press was also established around this time in Hooghly, which started the circulation of English newspapers in the British presidencies (Sailaja 2009: 98). These institutions especially the Hindoo College became quite popular among both rich and poor Indian students particularly because both English and Indian languages

were taught and poor students got scholarships to attend these colleges. In this connection, it should be the worth mentioned about The Down Filtration Theory designed by Macaulay finally achieved official patronage during the reign of Lord Bentinck, the first Governor-General of India in 1835. Since its inception English education has been pursued for basically two values---transcendental and utilitarian. English in one hand inspired liberal ideals among the educated Indians; on the other hand, it lured thousands of job aspirants who wanted to throng the posts of subordinate offices of the government. The 'Magna Carta of India Education' in 1854 made recommendations for the creation of universities, teacher training institutes, more English medium schools, as well as elementary and middle schools with vernacular instruction. These recommendations were put into effect with the creation of different types of educational institutions across the country. Thus Primary, Middle and Secondary level education became subservient to English medium higher studies. The nationalist leaders grew conscious of the role of English as a means of communication and unification in multilingual and multicultural India. Lord Curzon in the first decade of the twentieth century tried in vain to check the spread of English education and liberal ideals in the wake of burgeoning nationalism by means of imposing governmental control over education. During the days of National Education Movement set up as a branch of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement in the beginning of 1900s the ideologues of vernacular education like Rabindranath Tagore, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, and et al. rather appropriated English instead of getting rid of it. Even the Indian ministers of education during the Diarchy (1919-29) or Provincial Legislature since 1937 did not diminish the status of English in the scenario of Indian education. Thus, by the time India became independent the legacy of English as a compulsory subject throughout the school education was already founded.

A Brief Note on the Post-Independence History of English Language in West Bengal

After independence a Committee headed by the then Education Minister of West Bengal Shri Harendra Nath Roy Chowdhury was appointed by the Government of West Bengal in the year 1949 for the 'Reorganisation of School Education'. The Commission also comprised a good number of renowned educationists. Education was under state control till 1976 when it was put in the concurrent list. Still national commissions and policies often influenced states to formulate policies compatible with them. A universal and free primary education was aimed at by the Harendra Nath Roy Chowdhury's Committee. The Committee recommended that English should not be taught in the primary classes (Class I-V). Accordingly, the teaching of English was absolutely ruled out from the curriculum of Primary Education in West Bengal from the year 1950 to 1963. In this connection, it should be mentioned that the teaching of English was continued as usual in most of the provinces of India. In fact, in West Bengal, an attempt was made to abolish English from the primary stage but a large section of people opposed the view and voiced against such decision. Ultimately, owing to the pressure of parents English was again allowed to be taught from class III of primary schools in 1964. In fact, in those days the status of a primary school was measured by the standard of English in a school. The teaching of English as compulsory second language from class III continued until 1983.

On the other hand, West Bengal experienced different kinds of regimes like Congress rule, United Front rule, and Presidential rule till 1977 when the long-lasting Left-Front Government brought stability for 34 years at a stretch. It is noteworthy that in some of the states in India English was eliminated from the primary stage when the report of The Kothari Commission came out. In West Bengal too, in 1983 the Left Front Government in compliance with the recommendations of the Prof. Himangshu Bimal Majumdar Commission (1974-79) abolished English in the Primary stage (Classes I-V). The logic was mainly that English would interfere with learning the mother tongue at the Primary stage as well as to increase enrolment and to reduce the dropout rate. Thus, as a measure to diminish the importance of English in the new setup English was introduced at the beginning of High School stage, i.e. Class-VI. The aim of teaching English at the secondary level was to acquire just working knowledge of the language.

The decision, of course, was subjected to bitter public criticism and from the end of a section of educationists and intellectuals with the allegation that it was attempt of reducing the due importance of English in the field of education without taking into consideration its importance in the social and economic sphere. The government also could not convince the general public about the theory of teaching of English interfering with teaching of the mother tongue. Pabitra Sarkar Committee was the only one to enlist conflicting views from renowned sociolinguists and neurolinguists to justify its position. Educationists and intellectuals like Sunanda Sanyal, Sukanta Choudhuri, Supriya Choudhuri, also vociferously claimed for a child's aptitude to acquire more than one language simultaneously at an early age (Mitra 144, Sarkar 48-59). Mass movement throughout the state with the demand of reintroduction of English education from the primary stage was seen. In spite of such criticism and mass grievance, education without English at the primary stage went on for fourteen years. Against this backdrop, the Ashok Mitra Commission was instituted in 1992 to consider

the issue and recommended that the teaching of English at the primary stage in Government and non-Government schools should commence from class V at the secondary stage. The State Government, of course, did not admit the recommendation. Rampant public reactions, media criticisms and campaigns by the opposition parties in the wake of Parliamentary Election 1999 compelled the Government to set up a One-Man Committee under the chairmanship of Prof. Pabitra Sarkar in 1998. Besides, states like Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc. provided instances of successful introduction of English from earlier stages of schooling. West Bengal was clearly lagging behind them. The failure of candidates from West Bengal in all India examinations and interviews mostly in the field of civil services, engineering and medicine intensified public dissidence against the government's policy. The circulation of those views in the media and the increasing protest from the opposition like S.U.C.I and the T.M.C made the government nervous at the wake of election every time forcing them into policy modifications. Thus, the policy was changed in 1994-95 (in the wake of 1996 Parliamentary and Assembly Election); in 1999 (1999 Parliamentary Election); and in 2004-05 (2004 Parliamentary Election and 2006 Assembly Election) keeping in mind the imperative of real politics.

The Pabitra Sarkar Committee tried to justify earlier policies vis-à-vis English education by giving instances from Neurolinguistics. But he also took account of Government's desperation to address popular demand in the wake of middle-class aspirations resulting from economic reforms by the Left Front Government. The Committee, therefore, recommended beginning of English from the second half of Class-II. The Government readily implemented it in 1999. Another Committee under the chairmanship of Prof. Ranjugopal Mukhopadhyay was founded in 2001. The Committee submitted its final report in 2003. It maintained that the Government should not have surrendered to the popular whims of introducing English at an earlier stage. It suggested a rollback of English from Primary schools and introducing it in Class-V. But at the advent of the globalization of world trade and commerce, the West Bengal Government pondered over the issue again. As a result, the left-front led Government, however, accepted that proposal and reintroduced English in Class-I in all government-run Primary schools in 2004. Thus, the circle became full within two decades. And the most pleasing fact is that the present Government has made a proposal to set up English medium Primary Schools to recognise the importance of English and to make an initiative to change the existing scenario of English education in West Bengal.

Current Practice of English as a Second Language at Lower Primary Level in West Bengal Curriculum:

The goal of teaching the second language at the primary level is to ensure that the students are able to speak and write in that language. The students have to have a good grasp over the second language as well as the first language. This is an area which the new curriculum lay emphasis on because the Expert Committee on the Development of English Language is of the opinion that skills in two languages are important for the language skill development of a child attains in one language can be transposed into the other and vice versa. At the primary level, there is an interest in teaching the two languages in an integrated manner. This will help in the overall integration of the curriculum since language have to be integrated with environmental studies, mathematics and history – geography. The second language classes will begin simultaneously with the first language classes in class I. The children have to be taken from the level of seeing-listening-recognizing and understanding to the level of speaking -reading-drawing and writing. Physical education, games, creative work will be incorporated in the second language as in the first.

From class III to class V, there must be emphasis on enabling the student to express himself/herself in both languages. The students should be able to understand the integrated concepts and learn to think in interesting ways.

If we go through the above statements made by the Expert Committee on School Education, 2011-2012, in their school curriculum document, we see that:

- i) Development of the four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, which is the universally accepted goal of language learning has been reaffirmed.
- ii) For Second language learning/acquisition inter-subject correlation is a must in order to provide more exposure to English which is the other name of the concept "English across the Curriculum".
- iii) It has also spoken of successive bilingualism which is also a universally accepted concept of Second Language Acquisition signifying that our children have acquired/learnt a lot of the First Language/Mother tongue when they come to the schools and start learning English as their second language.

- iv) Regarding the process of presentation and receiving English in or outside classrooms, it has laid down a psychologically sound principle of seeing-listening-recognizing and understanding to the level of speaking-reading-drawing and writing.

Therefore, it is evident that development of communicative competence through language activities and games in a joyful and trauma free classroom environment, leading to the use of the accurate and appropriate language, is the major objective of English Language Learning at the Elementary level.

A few specific details have been thought of regarding Second language teaching:

1. Second language teaching at the primary level will be done bilingually. But in higher classes, the students should be familiar with and be fluent in the Second language.
2. Emphasis should be on speaking and writing.
3. The reading skills of the students must be increased gradually. For this, the library must have books in the second language and the students must be encouraged to read books in the second language. The standards of reading skills have to be determined keeping in mind the students who are lagging behind in a particular class.
4. At first the student should be taught to listen and understand the Second language. Gradually, the skills have to be taken to a level where the student can listen, understand and answer questions in that language. The final target should be to enable students to coherently express their opinions in that language.
5. The students should have a good vocabulary in the Second language and this vocabulary can be built with the help of classroom activities. The syllabus and textbook of the Second language should be developed according to this plan.
6. The students should be made skilled at using the Second language in daily situations. The students who are unable to do these must be taught with special attention and care.
7. Poems, songs and limericks must be practised regularly in the Second language so that the students understand the specificities of that language.

The Expert Committee on the Development of English Language has been formed exclusively for monitoring and for prescribing proper guidelines to achieve the specified objectives of learning English at the Elementary level in accordance with the NCF-2005.

Conclusion

English at lower primary level is a universal phenomenon. It is globally acclaimed that the impact of English at lower primary level is very significant in the sense that it can enhance easily the inherent language capacities of the learners. So, English has been incorporated with the primary education system in India also. Now, English has established as a full-fledged second language at lower primary level in West Bengal too. But, the journey of manifestation as a second language was not so smooth in Bengal. It had to confronted lots of hurdles which were also overcome successfully. Sometimes English was totally wiped out from the curriculum of primary education in West Bengal. As a result, the youths of Bengal were lagging in ever sphere of life. They we're not able to adjust themselves with the rapid changing situation of the world. So, the government reconsidered their decision and introduced English to fulfil the demand and aspirations of the learners at lower primary level in West Bengal. Now the teaching- learning process of English is continued as per the prescribed guidelines of NCF-2005 on English as a second language at lower primary level. Simultaneously, the present government of West Bengal has made a proposal to establish new English medium primary schools. Considering the above facts, learning English, the universal language, as a Second Language at lower primary level, becomes inseparable branch as also unavoidable in Indian education system as well as in West Bengal's present educational scenario.

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