

## **VERNACULAR LANGUAGES VS. ENGLISH: AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN INDIAN EDUCATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language proficiency is one of the myriad skills required of every employee across the globe. In the last two decades, it has been observed that communicating fluently in English has assumed considerable importance for recruiters. The obvious outcome, over the years, has been a substantial increase in the English-speaking individuals, especially in developing nations. Yet, the fact staring at us is quite contrary to the expectations. Developing adeptness in a language, varied from one's family language, demands continuous and comprehensive efforts under an efficient and pragmatic influence, lest learning remains incomplete, impractical, and proves to be a sheer wastage of time.

English is the only international standard language, widely known and spoken as a second language in independent sovereigns like India. A standard language can be roughly defined as a tongue possessing its own script (the written form) and phonetics (the spoken form). A well-structured grammar strews these two features together to create coherent linguistic phenomena.

**Keywords:** myriad, adeptness, comprehensive, script, phonetics, coherent

### **INTRODUCTION**

English is the most widely spoken language in the world today. Historically speaking, it has been the ruler's language in most of the countries which had existed as a British colony once. In the present era, however, the prejudice attached to it has worn off and English is largely considered as the language of the masses now. It goes without saying that English connects the whole world in more ways than one. It is not only the language of international trade and commerce but also provides an open platform for socio-cultural exchange. In most of the nations, English remains as the lingua-franca, although the linguistic richness of those territories are very much existent and thriving. This logically follows then that English must be a comparatively easy language to learn. This would be quite an inappropriate manner to speak of this human tongue, since it has its nuances and is majorly different from most of the languages known elsewhere.

In most of these countries I speak of, English is learnt as a second language. The first language that the child is exposed to, is the mother tongue(L1). As soon as the child reaches school, English acquisition begins. Here, we need to halt and mull about the multiple factors at play. We must delve deeper to understand as to why, despite English's universal significance, the young minds reject acquiring proficiency in this wonderful tongue at school level itself.

**Categories of Causes:** There are innumerable deterrents that prevent the local Indian students from learning English as a second language, which can be enumerated in categories for a better understanding. I choose to enlist them under two broad heads -

**A -Empathetic causes-** those factors that are intrinsic to the socio-cultural ethos, preventing use of English as a medium of communication among the members of the immediate society

**B -Apathetic causes-** the extrinsic factors that prevent the natives to consider English as a language worthy to be learnt, largely due to apathy from the learned and the trusted

**A The former category includes –**

- 1 Familial Culture
- 2 Regional Background
- 3 Financial Affordability
- 4 Social Influences

**B The latter category includes –**

- 1 Under-trained Teachers
- 2 Flawed Education System
- 3 Unproductive Policies and Their Improper Implementation

**Familial Culture:** Family, being the basic unit structure of society, plays a vital role in the skill-set of the children born to it. The genetic factors are mostly limited to physical and bodily traits while the environment provided, shapes the choices of the individual children. Usually, most of the Indian parents wish their children to pick up English basics at school by themselves, with a little aid from the teacher. The child learns this language at school, returns home, receives no reinforcement here; subsequently unlearns most of the acquired language, which gets undesired attention from the whole family only in the poor scores of the learner. Some families are proud of how well their children fare out in the second language initially. Therefore, the shock of their later underperformance is felt more vehemently. The adults run from pillar to post, to supply extra support to their kids in the form of personal tuitions. The expectation revolves around decent marks in English, so that the overall performance is enhanced. Nobody cares if the child learns a language or not. So, learning English as a language takes a backseat while as a subject in the school curriculum, it is raised to the pedestal of one of the mandatory subjects. The families along with the beginners, remain oblivious to this dichotomy. Naturally, the vicious cycle continues till it is too late to take worthwhile action.

**Regional Background:** In India, there are such regions like Kerala, Mumbai, Delhi and Bengal, that are considered pro-English areas. The majority of people here belong to the class of Simultaneous Bilinguals, who learn their mother tongues and English almost together. Hence, their early proficiency in the language. However, the furtherance of education, profession and life in general demand proficiency in their communicative skills, where English is again side-tracked and the local language becomes all-important. English finds itself in the ‘Languages Known’ corner of one’s resume. A fairly successful life is often equated with the knowledge of the vernacular predominant there. Strangely, English as a language, is not promoted at all even in these pockets where learning this language met with almost no impediment at school level. The state boards introduce English at the middle primary, with a skeletal syllabus. Then, before entering the secondary level, English becomes optional and is casted out without a second thought. Actually, this myth still appears to be true due to the people from these places who did well or wanted to do better and moved onto places that supported their dreams and ambitions. English language is an integral part of their journey.

**Financial Affordability:** Families of poor backgrounds seek to make English accessible to their children, though, not much choice is available at their disposal because they are

financially constrained. The best option appears in the form of a local school where the child can at least complete elementary education without disrupting the family income. So far, it is sad but tolerable. Something that puzzles the observer, is the reluctance of the well-to-do parents to promote learning English as a language that can assist their wards to soar higher and reach great heights. Naturally, the students with a good academic record also fail to converse in fluent English. Their level is either of a beginner or at the most, that of an intermediate learner as far as English is concerned. The vernaculars are overused in every aspect of local life. When realizations dawn in the young minds, they set out to learn English, with their future aspirations in perspective. Since economic limitations do not pose much of a problem for them, they readily embark on their growth and development. The local tongues still remain functional in daily life. Change occurs in the increased time allowed to English as a means of communication. Within an optimum duration, these candidates gain a fair amount of proficiency in this foreign language after which, there is no looking back.

**Social Influences:** A progressive society influences its members in a positive manner. On the other hand, a regressive society can cripple individuals into toxic, superstitious, heavily prejudiced and dysfunctional people, who hinder the growth of their own kind on the pretext of saving their cultural heritage and traditional richness. Wrong examples are given to the youth, to deviate them from learning or accepting the supremacy and relevance of everything foreign, including English because it enjoys an international status and does not conform to any Indian vernacular. Disregard for differences and disdain for innovative ideas are a hallmark of the narrow-minded social interference we are talking about here. Gender-biasness and a tremendous hesitation to see things for what they are realistically, prove detrimental to the growth-mindset of the Indian youth. The crab-like nature of such a society allows no scope for talented and active individuals to move forward and hone their skills through proper training and reach out to the world. The channel of connectivity had already been severed by shunning English as a global link, a long while ago.

The other contrasting group comprises of those people who recognize the importance of English language. Instead of gathering better intel, they find it more gratifying to show their little knowledge and propagate a false image of this human tongue. English remains a language no more. It becomes a class now. The vernacular-fluent citizens are intimidated and hence, alienate themselves from the English speaking public. In the process, English becomes a distant and unachievable target for most. Vernacular tongues provide solace and comfort in these instances.

**Under-trained Teachers:** Educational institutions recruit teachers who are sometimes neither skilled nor interested in language teaching. However, their candidatures speak of high qualifications which lands them the job. In the classroom environment, their teaching approaches and methodologies depict obsolete theories like Grammar-cum-Translation method, which is not conducive to any language learning. These mentors usually complete the syllabus on time but the learners remain clueless in all the aspects of their language learning. Consequently, the results depict controversial statistics. There remain several unresolved problems which are never addressed. The learners are most often accused for their failures or under-achievement both by the teacher as well as the parents. However, the learner is just an unsuspecting victim! The language instructors do not update their knowledge from time to time. Instead, they just rely on notes made long time back. Most of what is learnt in class, is of little use in the world outside. Obviously, it is forgotten as soon as it is learnt. Moreover, the teachers focus on classic texts and their questions and answers; the process becoming marks-oriented rather than understanding-based. A great amount of emphasis is laid on cramming grammar-rules without much application to develop proper understanding.

The learning of or acquiring the second language becomes devoid of any fun and that is why – tedious! English teachers themselves converse in local languages, demonstrating the fact that English learning should remain limited to the confines of the classroom. A non-native English student does not receive positive reinforcement from peers or teachers. As an immediate adverse impact, young learners start detesting and ignoring their language proficiency in this language due to the inefficient teaching methodologies, that target only syllabus-completion. Classes are generally teacher-centric and queries of the learners meet with irrelevant and incomplete explanations or are sarcastically snubbed at the initial stage.

In majority of these institutes of language teaching, the main challenge is the teacher who is not competent enough to change the dynamics but continues to reign supreme owing to prolonged service tenure. These people are very good at noticing the loopholes in the management or education system and manipulate accordingly, to reap the benefits of being deemed as loyal employees.

It would be quite imprudent to under-estimate the latent potential in these intellectual beings. They can alone bring forth the required improvements in the environment, if trained properly, motivated to gain knowledge in current global trends of language teaching and guided ethically.

**Flawed Education System:** A redundant system is marked by its sub-standard products. When we are talking in context of human beings, they can hardly be considered just products. In fact, they are a resource, to be precise. People transform into resources after they attain sufficient skill-enhancement in their chosen field of interest. Every aspect of human training and subsequent development is heavily dependent on linguistic efficiency. Here, English plays a pivotal role in metamorphosing students into adept citizens who can actively contribute to the nation's growth. In India, where every region boasts of a vernacular tongue, English enjoys a very limited sincerity among general people. This is much deeper and twisted than a love for one's mother tongue. Apart from an empathetic understanding among people, removing English as an unworthy language at the very first stage of learning, the education system also allows the supremacy of the vernaculars to such an extent that people feel no need to learn and attain proficiency in English. The education system is flawed enough to discourage its students from acquiring a global language and instead focus on using the local language to reach a comfortable lifestyle. The officials entrusted with such huge social responsibility, fail to look beyond the immediate time frame and continue with the primitive but much – practiced method of language learning approaches. Innovative and creative methods of teaching are viewed with suspicion and are discarded as “Western Culture Influence”. Despite being in the position to enforce changes and effect an upward and forward trend in the education sector, they turn a blind eye towards future possibilities. In doing so, they just ignore the fact that their citizens could have been internationally placed, had they been exposed to better and flexible academic system, in time.

**Unproductive Policies and Their Improper Implementation:** An overpopulated country like ours, needs good strong policy – framework that provides ample scope to be executed well at the grass root level, with maximum benefit to the constrained but deserving people. Notwithstanding all the factors discussed before, this factor can be the game - changer in this scenario. This is so because the mass, the officers, the administration and organizations, all come under the purview of the Government. The problem is the formulation of an inclusive policy that reaches beyond the present comfort of the learners and channels them to greater heights of achievements through well – directed efforts. The limitation not just remains at the legislation level. The discrepancy percolates down to all the levels of implementation. Ironically, there are educated and capable individuals at the highest helm of policy making

and implementation. Yet, policies and schemes, in light of language learning, has undergone no such changes that might reflect the concern of the elite for the common man. Educative pursuits have definitely received some attention from the government over the years, but English has, unfortunately, been granted the status of a mandatory subject at some private schools while in government schools, it is just a subject that needs to be passed only. The policies framed for education, are impractical and unproductive. Whoever wishes to acquire a fair knowledge in this language, has to needlessly spend more time and resources on gaining the desired level of proficiency in this language. English is not the language of the public in India. Vernaculars are already promoted by the State Governments. This means that the Central Government must take the onus of making policies that uplift English to a language of communication and implement them with the help of experts who understand the theme of such projects. Easier said than done. This requires a considerable amount of time and budget to train and prepare the executives for proper implementation of the proposed policies.

### **Some Humble Suggestions for Ushering and Maintaining Positive Changes:**

It is rightly said, that it is never too late to do the right thing. The ambitious project of establishing English as one of the main mediums of communication in a vast country like India, is a mammoth task. This is so, not just because of the huge territorial expanse of the sub-continent or its teeming populace. It is so because of the general mindset of a people having immensely diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Common grounds are few and far. Respecting differences is not the usual *modus operandi*. Notwithstanding these mentioned obstacles, we are capable enough to plan certain measures to bring noticeable improvements into the picture. They are as follows:

1. The teaching methodologies can be aligned to inductive style instead of deductive style.
2. Teaching personnel and educators must be trained flawlessly, in modern and tech-savvy methods by competent experts having first-hand experience in teaching English, both as a second and foreign language.
3. At school and college levels, English should be promoted as a language meant for relevant conversations across all groups, especially among teachers themselves, since they are closely followed by their learners and emulation goes a long way in linguistic training.
4. Incentives, in both forms of cash and kind, can generate interest in acquiring and learning this language. Verbal appreciation should not be underestimated, for it not only helps break the ice and nudges the beginner onto the right path, but also provides an encouragement that allows the learner to keep the morale high and not lose confidence easily while learning.
5. The focal point of imparting English, should be comprehension and speaking, instead of isolated grammar practice. This would activate larger retention capacity among students, as stories connect far greater than some stray fact, in our minds.
6. The government can rope in a pool of reputed professionals from the fields of linguistics, social sciences and legal arenas, who can shoulder the designing, planning and implementation of water-tight projects with English for the masses.
7. Mass media should be made optimum use of, by the government, to raise awareness among citizens, that English is not just a subject to be learnt and forgotten, but a

wonderful language to be acquired in order to explore new avenues of economic prosperity through communicative fluency.

8. Teachers of English, across educational and professional institutes must develop a readiness to solve any and every doubt or difficulty of the learner respectfully; so that people stay motivated throughout their learning process. Empathy is what distinguishes a facilitator from a teacher. The person on the other side of the desk is greatly revered by the students. Therefore, what the mentor says is never more important than how one delivers the concept.
9. Vernaculars must be continued to be taught and learnt with fervor. However, English must be emphasized as an international language that has the power to bring the whole world at their doorstep. English needs to be interwoven into the academic curriculum in simple and easy ways, to avoid inhibiting the beginners.

## **CONCLUSION**

Vernacular tongues are intrinsic to the culture of the people. They are inbuilt in the psyche of the common man. That said, these local Indian languages do not face any threat of being forgotten or substituted by English. Instead, the mother tongue speech habits, that mostly interfere in learning a foreign tongue, can be viewed as the starting point of incorporating shifts into the system for a better outcome.

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