

Reconsidering English Language Teaching in Vernacular-medium Schools of India with an Emphasis on Employability

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Abstract: *Although there have been recurring reforms in the policy of Indian government towards the teaching and learning of English and currently English is taught as a compulsory subject in all schools (Unnisa, 2012), students from vernacular-medium schools suffer as apart from total unfamiliarity with the language, the pedagogies used to teach English do not enable them to speak the language fluently. Albeit, the demands in India for better teaching and learning of English are not being met meaningfully in vernacular-medium schools (Gupta, 2012; Javalgekar, 2013; Kumaran, 2011; Ramanathan, 2007). Vernacular-medium students in India mostly leave school speaking a language that would not be recognised in the job market (Pathan & Shiakh, 2012). This paper is a review of related literature to suggest a reconsideration of English language teaching in vernacular-medium schools of India with an emphasis on employability.*

Keywords: *English language teaching, vernacular learner, employability*

Importance of English in India:

The British gifted a common language to the world. English language has made it easier for the world in sharing any type of information quick and clear without any translation. While the British left their colonies decades ago, their efforts and reforms in the area of education are yielding outcomes now in India (Graddol, 2010).

Effective communication entails the potential to communicate efficiently in any language. Academicians as well as researchers are separated in their viewpoint on the question; is English essential to successful business communication? Is it not possible to communicate effectively in regional languages and get the work done successfully? Those people who are in favour of English for effective communication would claim that English is the official language for most of the organizations in Indian cities nowadays. Moreover, English is the language which connects people from different regions, cultures and nations. Post internet period of development has demanded much more curricular space and infrastructure for English language, in view of its

unquestioned emergence, as the global medium of communication and the key to knowledge and employment.

In the globalized climate of the world economy, English has emerged as the global language of education and business (Menon & Patel, 2012). It is a common medium that offers academic mobility and credit transferability all over the world. An indispensable shift in employment options has also taken place, by which the state is no longer the major employer. The private sector employer, in his struggle to endure in a globalized and competitive environment, is ever more insisting on English as an essential skill for employment.

Globalisation has urged the domestic companies in India to think beyond the nation. The increased globalization of the professional world means that there are more workers who are non-native speakers of English (Menon & Patel, 2012). Moreover, since Indian companies have a highly multi-cultural and multi-lingual work environment, English is the language which also connects people by default. It is the language used for all types of official communications e.g. letters, reports, meetings, presentations, conferences, documents, interviews etc. Therefore the job candidates and existing employees are expected to be fluent in English language (Menon & Patel, 2012).

However, previous research reveals that the standard of English in India now is not substantially high. This reality, though true, did not affect the urban elite children who go to premium English-medium schools of the country.

Quality teaching crisis:

Except in the small number of fee levying private and metro schools accessed by the children of wealthy families, and in an exceptionally few government schools, the quality of English teaching in the vernacular-medium schools is exceedingly low. Very poor quality English language teaching is delivered to students in these schools (Masani, 2012).

Vernacular-medium teachers in India teach English only as a language in school. They generally follow bilingual approach and summarise everything in the mother tongue of the students on the pretext of making them understand (Patil & Sultana, 2012). Generally in the vernacular-medium classrooms, the teachers rarely read out the lessons and rarely speak in English with the students. They compel the students to practice rote learning, and dictate brief summaries of the English lessons, with the sole purpose to make the students pass their examinations (Francis, 2014).

There is thus an immediate need for radically upgrading the English teaching practices in the country, both in the state-run and private vernacular-medium schools. English teaching methods that are in practice are quite obsolete and advanced spoken / communicative English teaching methodologies are very few – if at all – and far between. Conventional teaching methods and course material have evolved in a manner most suitable for teaching English to children from

homes and environments that already use English. They have been found to be largely inappropriate for teaching English to children from vernacular language speaking homes and environments (Khan, 2015a; Patil & Sultana, 2012). These children are mostly living in under-privileged and economically-deprived environments.

Undoubtedly it is clear that English plays a foremost and official role in the daily lives of very large numbers of people in India and therefore, it remains the obligation of English teachers to develop the English language capabilities of their students (Gupta, 2012). But vernacular-medium students in India mostly leave speaking a language that would not be recognised in the job market (Pathan and Shiakh, 2012). Around 47 million of Indians in the 15-24 age range were unemployed and so looking for work, based on alarming data published in the 2011 Census of India. This volume of jobless youth is staggeringly immense — around 47 million, of which 26 million were men and 21 million women. The National Employability Report on Indian Graduates by Aspiring Minds (2013), an employability solutions company, draws on an employability test performed on a large sample of 60,000 graduate students from many colleges and universities in India. The survey report uncovers that a critical number of graduates in India, approximately 47%, were found not employable in any field based on their English language skills and conceptual abilities. India's crisis is not just unemployment – but also unemployability of a vast majority of the people of our country who are unable to communicate proficiently in English. In a reasonably competitive environment, with swift paced technological advancements, the students who are taught English in an unskilled method deal with social problems like unemployment, and personal issues such as reduced self-confidence and increased inferiority complex (Masani, 2012; Murugavel, 2011; Sasidharan, 2012).

The content of the syllabus and teaching methods are not minimally re-structured. Teaching strategies used for vernacular students need to be improved in the framework of contemporary ICT advancements in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching). There is a need to introduce English teaching strategies based on the needs, context and constraints of the vernacular-medium schools and their learners (Khan, 2015a).

English for employability:

Since the private sector companies are gaining ground and getting more competitive as a result of developed global economy, the employees are invariably kept on their toes. The potential to use a language efficiently is quite much expected to remain employable. What is employability? It is the ability to gain employment and/or remain employed because of the suitable skills one possesses. Communication skills are particularly crucial for one's professional growth. The potential to communicate fluently in both written and oral communication is very vital for the employment (Clement & Murugavel, 2015).

As previously stated, English being the most commonly used language in the corporate environment; the skills in English is one of the most important employability competencies. Familiarity with English is much recognized in the corporate world (Aspiring Minds, 2014). Proper English does not imply merely the ability to make grammatically correct sentences. It implies further related skills for effective communication like presentation skills, persuasive and negotiation skills, and interpersonal skills using the language.

In fact, most recruiters in India very specifically stipulate that if one does not have knowledge of English they do not want them. The reality is that the companies consider the candidate's ability or inability to speak fluently in English as one of the major selection criterion.

Ineffective English language training centres:

Because of the rising demand for communication skills in English, many students frequently lookout for external assistance in the form of spoken English classes, training programs, and finishing schools (Sasidharan, 2012). Moreover, due to poor standards of teaching English in vernacular-medium schools, it has become rather easy for the 'tuition industry' to thrive. The English coaching classes industry is an incredibly lucrative market. There are over a million private tutoring institutes/tuition classes spread throughout India. Being entirely unregulated, the standard of English teaching in this coaching market is no better than what prevails in the vernacular-medium schools (Puri, 2008). But devoid of a better option or remedy, parents send their children and school drop-outs to these English classes as they associate the future career of their children to their skills in English.

The number of these institutions is mushrooming as a consequence of the rising demand of English in higher education and job market. But unfortunately most training centres don't have capable language teachers. So students don't learn what they need and expect (Puri, 2008). But, whatever is the outcome of teaching; these institutes have become good lucrative entities. These institutions thrive on the needs, complexities and low self-esteem of the vernacular-medium students (Puri, 2008).

In order to cater to the demands of regional language medium students in their efforts to get good jobs in the corporate world, the vernacular-medium schools should bring changes in the English language teaching pattern right from primary school level. The emphasis should be on teaching communicative and functional English. So the need of the hour is strengthening the English speaking ability of the present generation from economically-deprived environments to have an edge over English-medium students from elite backgrounds in India.

Recommendations:

In this day and age, it is a lot more important to empower the students with communicative English to meet their future professional challenges (Francis, 2014). The vernacular-medium

learners could be gradually educated on vital skills such as soft skills, core employability skills and communication skills (Rani & Jayachandran, 2014). Also, the English teachers could be trained adequately by way of pre-service and in-service professional development, within the context and constraints of the school and the students, in order to develop their English teaching competence and cater to the emerging needs of the ESL learners in vernacular-medium schools (Rani & Jayachandran, 2014). While teaching English, it is crucial for the English teacher to identify the learner's basic linguistic understanding, cultural background and emotional intellect (Jayakar & Tejaswani, 2013).

Mohapatra and Satpathy (2014) suggested that all students should be furnished with the opportunity and learning environment so that they can engage with and participate in the learning English language and develop competence. This may require adjustments to curriculum tasks, teaching materials, classroom organization and management, learning experiences, teaching styles and assessment procedures (Mohapatra & Satpathy, 2014). To actualise these adjustments, English teachers could utilise new choices of teaching and learning materials (in print and multimedia format) in order to help vernacular learners acquire linguistic skills effectively. English teachers need to adapt innovative resources in addition to enhancing their own proficiency in English (Chauhan, 2012).

Khan (2015b) explored the potential of multimedia technology in vernacular-medium schools of India and suggested that television material can be a foundation of the English course, especially where the learning goals relate to communication skills, or an occasional activity, supplementing the textbook. Khan (2015a) also suggested an approach based on contextual-collaborative knowledge, teaching theories and methods, to improve the quality of teaching and learning English in vernacular-medium schools of India. Either way, a new approach is likely to be most successful when there is some consensus from schools in India (Khan, 2015b).

Conclusion:

Although, it is imperative to impart spoken English skills to underprivileged children from vernacular-medium schools to enhance their employability, the importance of English is not at the cost of regional/local/national language (Pramod & Kad, 2013). Both can co-exist together without adversely affecting each other.

The indisputable connection between English language and employment is recognized and valued. Therefore the teaching of English language skills should be designed in such a way as to serve purely as a tool of employment. In policies pertaining to language and education in vernacular-medium schools, primacy of importance should be placed on regional language. However, English should be taken seriously as an 'Employability Skill' and students in vernacular-medium schools should be trained accordingly.

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