

Language Policy and ELT Programme in Assam

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***Abstract:** The study is a small scale project undertaken primarily to focus on the language policy and the status of ELT in Assam (India). It traces the status and development of ELT in Assam. It also deals with the vision and prospects of ELT in the state. Finally, policy and operational issues are examined, each critical to the task of improving the reach and quality of ELT education.*

***Key Words:** Language policy, History of English, ELT*

Introduction

There are many languages in India. A total of 122 languages and 234 mother tongues have been recorded in India in the census of 2001. This multilingual situation is the product of India's long history and the basic structure of the Indian languages is thus made up of Aryan and Dravidian families. Aryans form the biggest of the language groups in India, accounting for 75 percent of the entire population. The important languages in this group are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Sindhi and Urdu. The Dravidian families of languages account for 25 percent of the entire population and it constitutes some important languages such as Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam.

Major Scheduled Language Speakers in Assam

According to the census of 1901, English speaker in Assam were 2234, out of them 1635 were male and 599 were female and 20549 returned themselves as being literate in English (Allen, 1989:93). In 1991 census of India, the total numbers of speakers of English as a second language are 64,602,299 and that of speaker of English as a third language are 25,440,188. According to the brochure, distribution of languages in India in and union territories were based on the analysis of the 1961 census data. It indicates that out of total 6784271 language speakers, only 2080 were pure English speakers in Assam. Gradually, according to 2001 Census, there has been increase in the number of English speakers.

Table 1

Major Scheduled Language Speakers in Assam	
Languages	Percentage
Assamese	48.81
Bengali	27.55
Hindi	5.89
Bodo	4.86
Nepali	2.12
English	0.33
Others	10.44

(Source: Census 2001, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore.)

A Brief History of English in India

English came to India with the British. Since the English had come here for the purpose of trade, in the beginning, they focused their attention only on trade and did not bother to encourage the teaching of English, but with them had come some missionaries who started schools where English was taught as one of the subjects (Bose, 1989:99). The traders found themselves in the position of rulers. In order to have full command over the people whom they had begun to govern they decide to open educational institutions. Two such institutions were Calcutta Madrassa started in 1781 and Benares Sanskrit College founded in 1791. They were the institutions of classical learning, but they also made a provision for the teaching of English. In this way, the teaching of English in India was started by the British rulers. The importance of English went on increasing with the passage of time. A great demand for the spread of English education had begun in the different parts of the country. To meet this demand Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Hindu College in 1817. Soon, thereafter the missionaries opened a number of schools and colleges in which the teaching of English was given utmost importance. In 1835, Macaulay, in his famous minute, strongly recommends that the spread of western learning could only be possible through the medium of English language. Macaulay argued that, 'English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit and Arabic' and 'the natives are desirous to be taught English' and that 'it is possible to make natives of this country through good English scholars'. Macaulay's recommendation gave an impetus to the study of English as a result of which the study of the regional languages got marginalized. By 1837, the missionaries had begun to provide a significant part of the facilities for teaching English. Not very long thereafter, English

became the language of administration and judiciary in India even as the vernaculars continued to be used in several instances. Almost simultaneously subordinate level positions in the judicial and administrative institutions were thrown open to Indians by a government resolution (Bose, 1989).

In 1853, the year when the Company's charter was renewed once more, under the pressure of government personnel to manage the widening domain of its, "India activities" the company decided to open up its highest Civil Service appointments to Indians by allowing them to appear for a competitive examination set up for this purpose. As a follow up of the Wood's Despatch of 1854, the first formalized and formulated education policy statement of the East India Company three universities were established in 1857 at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras respectively. However, the Indian Education Commission (1882) expressed its dissatisfaction at the exclusive use of English as the medium of education. The Indian Universities Commission (1902) also raised its voice against the neglect of regional languages. The Calcutta University Commission (1917-1919) tried to strike a balance by observing that, 'The educated classes in the various provinces of India will wish to be bilingual, to use their mother tongue for those dear and intimate things which form part of life and to use English as a means of inter-communication necessary for the maintenance of the unity of India, and of touch with other countries.'

Favoring the idea of encouraging the teaching of regional languages in schools and colleges the commission recommended, 'We are emphatically of the opinion that there is something unsound in a system of education which leaves a young man, at the conclusion of his course, unable to speak or write his own mother tongue fluently and correctly. It is thus beyond controversy that a systematic effort must henceforth be made to promote the serious study of vernaculars in secondary schools, intermediates colleges and in the university.' As a result of this recommendation, the medium of English was restricted only to the colleges and universities from 1920 onwards throughout the country. India got independence in 1947. Commissions and Committees and the leaders of public opinion took a close at the value of English and tried to strike a balance between gains and losses.

People like C. Rajagopalachari favored the continuance of English language, but there were persons who, under the influence of nationalism, advocated that English should go with the

English as it had come with them. They argued that English being a foreign language was responsible for the waste of student's time and energy. They declared that students could learn and express their ideas more easily in their mother tongue. Consequently, it was decided that regional languages should be developed and Hindi should replace English.

The University Education Commission (1949) suggested, among other things, that English be replaced, as easily as practicable, by an Indian language as the medium of instruction of higher education (UGC Report of 1949 on language policy). The constitution of India, adopted in 1950 provided for English to continue as the official language of the country for a period of fifteen years to be replaced by Hindi at the end of that period. Parliament later decided to allow English to continue as the associate official language of the Union till such time as Hindi began to be used for administrative purpose all over the country (Chand, *Op. cit.*: 156-163).

During the fifties the three language formula was formulated. It gave due importance to the regional languages and attempted to promote national integration and national identity through a national link language that could serve as a "Window of the World". In 1964 an Education Commission was set up to resolve the question of medium. The commission discussed this question and proposed that mother tongue should be used up to the highest level of instruction, but English should be taught both as a subject and as a library language at higher levels. As a result of the implementation of this proposal, mother tongue got precedence over English language and a state of stability has prevailed for two decades afterwards. The trend during the past two decades has however remarkably tilted in favour of English. With the result, English medium schools have cropped up like mushrooms in urban areas with under-qualified teachers. Since the students of such schools do not find exposure to mother tongue, their knowledge of mother tongue is very poor. They are being subjected to alienation from Indian culture and their cognitive development is also being blocked. English language teaching deserves an immense weight in the present age of globalization, but equal attention has to be paid to a multi-dimensional development of children so that they may excel in all spheres of life.

Present Position and Use of English in Assam

In modern Assamese society, English plays an important role in several spheres of life. Most official work in Assam is now done in English. The language of the court is English. The professional education like medical or engineering is all most invariably conducted through the medium of English. The importance of English has further increased with the proliferation of the use of computers and the internet which primarily use the medium of English. As in the rest of the India, English is today generally viewed as the language of opportunity and upward mobility in Assam. There has been concern about the poor performance in English in media and what exactly ails English Education in Assam. The Editor of *The Assam Tribune*, pointed out that the lack of practical command of the non-literary and non-technical English has created obstacles to good communicative skill of the Assamese students at school stage. Further he states: 'The few who have done well in their examinations also fail to get good jobs as lack of the knowledge of English or lack of the skill of communication through English stands as the main obstacle on their way. As a result of this, the number of unemployed youths has been increasing. The present world is fast-forwarding in science, technology, computer and other such advanced studies, and to keep pace with it, knowledge of English and ability to communicate well in English has become the primary need' (Bordoloi ,2001).

English medium schools seem to be an ever-rolling judgment with an increasing number of followers not only in Assam, but all over in India. (Das, 2001) .Also, the immense importance has been attached to the Spoken English Course in Assam to develop speaking skills. There are regular advertisements for this in local dailies as well as discussion about these in newspapers articles (Lais, 2005:39-40).

Development and Status of ELT in Assam

The liberalization of the Indian economy ushered in all kinds of reasons to learn the language in Assam territory. While earlier in the century students who had specialized in English joined either teaching or the civil services, now a whole new spectrum of job opportunities has opened up. There are now call centers that need trainers to equip their employees with communication skills, there are multinationals who have been recruiting marketing staff and they

needed to be taught spoken English, there are medical transcription centers which need efficient translators and reporters. Those desirous of immigration to the west needed professional help for clearing tests like the IELTS, TOEFL etc. Hence, the avenues where ELT came to be required in Assam are unlimited today.

The change was first observed at the social, political and economic levels of Assamese life. Suddenly, English ceased to be the badge of status for the upper crust. Earlier, only the upper classes and a few limited size groups were seen using English in everyday life. The middle class reserved it for official purposes or those social occasions where they wished to leave an impression. The lower classes thought the use of English was beyond them and since the government schools of India made no effort to teach any kind of spoken English, this category of people had no exposure to it. However, around the year 1995, the whole paradigm began to change. The liberalization of the economy led to the advent of multinationals resulting in many developments like varied job opportunities that demanded a command of English, more English channels on the television, an increasing number of English publications and international lifestyles becoming a tempting option (Lais,2005).

In a multilingual country like India, the medium of instruction from primary to higher education has always been an issue. The magnitude of the problem is evident at different stages of education. English as a medium of instruction continues to dominate over vernacular media in colleges and universities. It continues to be an exclusive medium in medical, agricultural and engineering courses. And this has often been the subject of discussion among academicians in spite of certain policy-decisions undertaken at the national level. What decisions have exactly been taken by the policy-makers? To what extent have the decisions taken so far been successfully implemented? How far are they close to the ground reality? The discussion strives to seek answers to these questions through an analysis of the language policy and the status of English as a medium of instruction at both the levels of school education (primary and secondary) and higher education (college and university).

During the period of Assamese- Bengali language controversy in the middle of 19th century the Western missionaries who were working in Assam were in the forefront of those who opposed the language policy of the Raj. They fought for the introduction of the Assamese by

replacing Bangla, and they support the teaching of English among the masses for spreading Christianity. The process of English teaching was started through translation method. The translation of English books in Assamese language in American Baptist Mission, viz, Nathan Brown translated the New Testament and works like Pilgrim's Progress into Assamese. Brown's grammatical notes and a vocabulary and phrase book by Miss Cutter were issued in 1848. A small vocabulary in English and Assamese was compiled by Mr. Wood in 1864. Later on Brown, Brownson and Farwell laid down the Christians-Assamese literature and spread English language in Assam (Shekhawat, *Op. cit.*:76-78).

Another way of ELT progress in Assam was through school teaching. Jenkin the first British man recommended to the Government of India to set up English schools in each Sadar stations in Assam under the supervision of European functionaries. In early March 1835, the Governor-General in Council finally resolved upon the promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives of India through the medium of English language. Gradually at Gauhati and Sibsagar English schools were opened under the supervision of European Headmaster. General Committee of Public Instruction strictly recommended what was so called *filtration theory*- that education should spread gradually from the higher to lower classes. They desired that the Guahati schools should produce a class of local instructors' expert in English literature and science. This in turn will help in dissemination of English Education. Fortunately, on the strong recommendation of Mr. Ross, the President of Council, the establishment of an Anglo-vernacular school was dropped. In the government schools at Sibsagar and Guwahati, there existed English as an independent department. In the beginning, emphasize was given on the study of English, and the chances of getting jobs attracted most of the pupils to the English Department. This set the trend of teaching of English (Nag, 1990).

Presently, English is taught in its general form in public schools grade five, while it is taught from kindergarten one in all the private schools. It is the medium of instruction in all the private schools and higher education throughout the state. It is a medium of instruction for many subjects at the tertiary level, such as science, medicine, dentistry, engineering and computer studies. The need for English language is even greater at higher degree level, it is essential in most major courses. The state universities have been organizing seminars, conference at the

national and international level on the teaching of English. Furthermore, book fairs are also organized time to time and they promote the selling of ELT text books, teacher's reference books, audio-visual materials developed by professional scholars and experts. It receives political, economic and legislative power from the government, which determines its place on the social hierarchy. English is considered as a resource for national development and it is an asset for finding a white-collar jobs. Thus, parents are seen in sending their children to the English medium schools. As a result, English medium schools are growing rapidly in the state. Besides, it is used as a medium for inter-state communication and also plays a dominant role in media. The English press is growing rapidly with the publication of English newspapers, journals and magazines.

The Assam government in partnership with the centre recognizes and stresses the importance and fundamental role of English language for its progress in different ways, as it is the language of science and technology and considered as an effective tool for modernization. In 1985, the Government of India requested the government of Assam to put forward proposals for improving the quality of English language teaching in the state. On this basis, English Language Teaching Institute, Assam (ELTIA) an autonomous organization was set up on 4th Sept 1986 under the Department of Education, Government of Assam. The aims of the institute as pointed out in its memorandum are:

- To promote the teaching and learning of English in Assam.
- To train all the teachers of English.
- To improve the syllabus, text books and the examination system and related matters in English.
- To improve the standard of teaching English as a second language, an institute of English language teaching should urgently be established in Assam

Decisions were taken for the introduction of a common link language as medium of higher education to avoid academic destabilization in education and to improve the standard of teaching English as a second language and in this regard, institute would be established at the earliest possible.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above study identified that the trend during the past two decades have been positive in favour of ELT, however the amount of attention needed for ELT in the wake of globalization is a fact for the educationists and experts to look at. In the wake of liberalized economy, there is a huge demand for qualified and trained teachers, translators, medical transcriptionists, reporters, ELT teacher educators and English language professionals needed in print and electronic media. Policies, programs and challenges related to the quality education in ELT calls for micro level planning at elementary, secondary and higher secondary level. As a matter of fact, concerted efforts are needed in this direction. Some of these recommendations could be:

1. There is a need to streamline the medium of instruction issue as this would give a common uniform framework for educating the learners in primary and middle schools. Flexible alternative strategies for special education to disadvantage groups must be initiated. Henceforth, more need-based Bridge courses in ELT from school level to the post school level must be launched (Assam Human Development Report, 2003).
2. Teacher recruitment and teacher Education in remote, difficult and far-flung areas is of immediate concern. It is advisable to recruit local teachers to combat the problem of teacher absenteeism (*Ibid*).As per the recommendations of Assam Human Development Report (*Op.cit.*) proper infrastructure, adequate facilities, special plans; local community involvement will pave the way forward for better education. However, the issue of teacher placement requires a planned strategy and this actually implies assessing the needs of the teacher in the modern context of national policies of teacher education.
3. Besides teacher accountability, there is an urgent need for flexibility in the curriculum and there should be proper space and provision for ‘incorporation of locally relevant materials and activities’. There is a great demand for ELT courses and this demand cannot be materialised unless the process of preparation and publication of textbooks, workbooks and teacher’s handbook can be taken up by the practising local teachers, experts and the views shared by the local community. Institutions like SCERT,

DIETs needs restructuring. What is needed is effective decentralization to mitigate the wide gender gap, the rural-urban divide and the gap between elite and deprived groups.

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