

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE: HISTORY AND PROBLEMS IN INDIA TODAY

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## Abstract:

*This paper aims at studying the historical background and the roots that brought English Language in India and the way it got strengthened. It also focuses on the pre-independent and post independent developments regarding the spread of English Language in India. The very British attempts to spread the language in India and its changing face today. It reviews English language as hegemonies to common man's language in India. It also studies the status in business, schools and society and ways to improve it as the need of an hour.*

## Introduction:

English currently is the most popular language in the world. Its unquestioned position as the *lingua franca* of the international business, media, science, education, and politics has spurred millions of people across the globe to learn this once marginal language. The resultant worldwide boom in teaching English as a second language has meant that native English speakers are in demand almost everywhere. The growing popularity of English language instruction has led to more professionalism within the ranks of English teachers.

The importance of English language learning cannot be overstressed. It is the official language of 63 countries and billion people around the world have some knowledge of English, either as a native language or as a second/foreign language. Except for certain regions in the world, English is the predominant language of international commerce. Proficiency of English language in the job market has not only become more crucial with globalization of trade but has opened up new jobs themselves with advances in the telecommunication technology. Many countries in the Indian Subcontinent use English as an important tool in higher education, administration and mass media. Presently it is taught in almost every country on earth.

English language learning for education purposes are fraught with difficult challenges in many countries like India and the United States of America. The latter as a nation of immigrants represents cultural and linguistic diversity. It can be viewed as a mixture of distinct cultures and tongues. Though much more complex, India's linguistic situation can be compared to that of USA. The various states in India have their own languages apart from the National Language i.e. Hindi. In India, National policy on language education recommends teaching of the three languages through schooling and for functional purposes, English chosen as one among those three in many situations.

## A Historical Overview:

In this section, I would like to brief the story of British India for strengthening the roots of readers towards the very web of English language in India. The information below is mainly from The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (NEB; 1974), It was Vasco da Gama

who, in 1498, came ashore at Calicut, and restored a link between Europe and the East. India was "a land of spices and of marvels" to European people. Portugal's control of the Indian Ocean lasted throughout the 16th century. The turning point came in the 1580s: in 1580 Portugal was annexed to Spain. Spain was not too interested in former interests of Portugal, and gradually the control of the East fell through their hands. The route to the East was opened to the Dutch and English. The Dutch were first ones to arrive in 1595. The Dutch objective was, plain and simply, the trade. They were not so interested in proselytizing people, or trying to expand their empire; they were monopolists rather than imperialists (NEB 392).

The document establishing the British contact with the Indian subcontinent was the Charter of December 31, 1600, granted by Queen Elizabeth I. It granted a monopoly on trade with India and the East to some merchants of London - the East India Company was formed (Kachru 1982:353). The company's objective was actually the spices of Indonesia, but because of Dutch opposition (e.g. massacre of Amboina in 1623), they decided to change plans and go to India instead. The English won victory over some Portuguese territories in India as well, and the Mughal court, which resented the Portuguese, granted the English the right to trade and to establish factories in return for becoming the virtual naval auxiliaries of the empire (NEB 393).

The English trade became more profitable than that of the Dutch, and the region gradually fell under British contact and domination. In 1818, the British Empire became the British Empire of India, instead of the British Empire in India. The diplomatic settlement remained in force until 1947 (401).

A question that has frequently been asked is: How was this sort of subjection of a whole subcontinent possible? Probably the answer lies in the innate divisiveness of Hindu society (class and caste divisions); for the Indians the neighbours were more unwelcome than outsiders; and the outsiders could actually help in defeating the neighbour. The outsiders were, in the end, accepted as masters; the Indians would rather be mastered by them than dominated by a rivaling family inside India (402).

### **Modern India and English Language:**

Many Indians visit the European and Asian countries and come back with almost as English man (foreigner) and for young excitable children, people and women in Indian villages, the sights and sounds of this new language speaking men are fascinating, they get surprised that people visiting foreign countries speak fluent English. Today, India is well recognized globally for its vast talent pool and well-educated professionals, but still there is only a dim understanding of what this vast country encapsulates. Indian English is something that many foreigners are unaware of and even if they are aware, they are unsure about its credibility.

English in India is a legacy from the British who colonized the country and their language permeated through some of the most important parts of society: the government, the media, the education system, the legal system, and gradually the social sphere as well. India is a vast nation and in terms of number of English speakers, it ranks third in the world after USA and the UK. An estimated 4 percent of the population use English and even though this may seem like a small number that is about 40 million people. This small segment of the population controls domains that have professional and social prestige. Though it is closer to British English since it originates from that style, with the influx of globalization American English has definitely had an impact on the youth as

well as in the professional sphere. However, it can neither be classified as American or British English as it intermingled with other Indian languages and emerged with its own distinct flavor. This has made several scholars realize that it cannot be equated with either.

***English in the Administration and Media:*** Though it is not classified as one of the 15 languages of India, English remains the associate official language along with Hindi, which is the official language. The reason for this is the large number of languages and dialects spoken in India and that several people are unfamiliar with Hindi. Though it lacks the symbolic power to be chosen as the sole official language, it is used widely in communication. The English press in India began serious journalism in the country and English language newspapers are published in practically all states. Not only has it impacted print media, but broadcasting media as well. There are several English news channels as well as several outstanding media courses offered at various institutions, which focus on journalism in English.

***The Education System:*** In higher education English is the premier prestige language. Careers in any area of business or commerce, or within the government, or in science and technology require fluency in English. It is taught in schools ranging from the most elite private schools to small government schools because only this language is an acceptable medium of communication through the nation.

***The Social Sphere:*** Other than the more formal sectors of administration, media, and education, English has seeped into the less formal social sphere. It is certainly considered instrumental in terms of having access to information from all over the world and as a key factor for professional success, but it is also very much a part of the educated middle and upper class person's life especially of the youth in India.

### **American English:**

Now American English is becoming more popular with the educated youth due to the number of American programs aired in India. While bureaucrats and officials continue to use archaic convoluted sentences, which are relics of British English, the younger generation is comfortable and familiar with American English. Here, I make the distinction not between an older and newer form of the language, but between a more formal and casual style. Several people speak English with their friends, and people get introduced to each other most often in English. Over half of all personal letters are also written in English.

**Indian Writing in English:** India is the third largest English book producing country after the US and the UK, and the largest number of books are published in English. Creative writing in English has been an integral part of the Indian literary tradition for many years. Many believe that is a challenge for Indian novelists to write about their experiences in a language, which is essentially "foreign".

### **The Future of English in India:**

The language has already been well established in the country and has acquired its own independent identity. With the number of foreign investors flocking to India and the growth of outsourcing, English has come to play a key role in professional relationships between foreign and Indian companies. Familiarity with the differences between American and British English has definitely grown as much business

communication is carried out according to the language style with which a client is comfortable.

Though many may perceive the accent, terminology, and conversational style as “funny”, in reality it is just a different English that cannot simply be equated with either American or British English. Indians are familiar with both types of English, but Indian English has acquired its own character in a country which is a melting pot of various cultures, people, and traditions.

### **Official status of English in India:**

Officially English has a status of assistant language, but in fact it is the most important language of India. After Hindi it is the most commonly spoken language in India and probably the most read and written language in India. Indians who know English will always try to show that they know English. English symbolizes in Indians minds, better education, better culture and higher intellect. Indians who know English often mingle it with Indian languages in their conversations. It is also usual among Indians to abruptly move to speak fluent English in the middle of their conversations. English also serves as the communicator among Indians who speak different language. English is very important in some systems – legal, financial, educational, business – in India. Until the beginning of 1990s, foreign movies in India weren't translated or dubbed in Indian languages, but were broadcast in English and were meant for English speakers only. The reason Indians give such importance to English is related to the fact that India was a British colony (see Europeans in India).

When the British started ruling India, they searched for Indian mediators who could help them to administer India. The British turned to high caste Indians to work for them. Many high caste Indians, especially the Brahmans worked for them. The British policy was to create an Indian class who should think like the British, or as it was said then in Britain “Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect”. The British also established in India universities based on British models with emphasis on English. These Indians also got their education in British universities. The English Christian missionaries came to India from 1813 and they also built schools at primary level for Indians in which the language of instruction was local language. Later on the missionaries built high schools with English as the language of instruction which obliged the Indians who wanted to study to have a good knowledge of English. The British rulers began building their universities in India from 1857. English became the first language in Indian education. The ‘modern’ leaders of that era in India also supported English language and claimed it to be the main key towards success. Indians who knew good English were seen as the new elite of India. Many new schools were established in which the language of instruction was English. According to the British laws the language of instruction at university level was English and therefore schools that emphasized English were preferred by ambitious Indians. Even after India's independence, English remained the main language of India. Officially it was given a status of an assistant language and was supposed to terminate officially after 15 years of India's independence, but it still remains the important language of India.

Even today schools in India that emphasize English are considered better schools and the same is the case at university levels, even though there is a trend towards Indianization. In the 1970s and 1980s about one third of the Indian schools had English as their first language. For most of these students, English is their first language and it is

easier for them to communicate, read and write in English than in Indian languages, including their mother tongues.

Just like the Americans, Australians or even the British who have their unique English words and phrases, the Indians also have their own unique English. The Indians and the Indian English language press uses many words derived from Indian languages, especially from Hindi. Other than that, the Indian accent is sometimes difficult for non-Indians to understand. There are some Indian pronunciations that don't exist in non Indian languages. The British also had problems with that and they caused some changes in Indian words so that they could pronounce them. Even the Indians started using these changed words and made them part of their English. Two examples of such changed words are currey and sari.

### **English Is The First Language For Many In India:**

In terms of numbers of English speakers, the Indian subcontinent ranks third in the world, after the USA and UK. An estimated 4% of the Indian population use English; although the number might seem small, out of the total population that is about 35 million people (in 1994)(Crystal 1995:101). Although the number of speakers of English in India is somewhat limited (as compared to the total population), that small segment of the population controls domains that have professional prestige (Kachru 1986a: 8).

English is virtually the first language for many educated Indians, and for many, who speak more than one language, English is the second one. Indian speakers of English are primarily bi- or multilingual Indians who use English as a second language in contexts in which English is used among Indians as a "link" or an "official" language. Only a minimal fraction of the English-using Indian population has any interaction with native speakers of English. According to Kachru's survey (the population of which was graduate faculty of English in the universities and colleges), only 65.64 percent had occasional interaction with native speakers of English; 11.79 percent had no interaction and 5.12 percent claimed to have daily interaction with native speakers of English (ibid, 110).

### **English: Administration and Press:**

English is not classified as one of the 15 national languages of India (NEB:286). Although Hindi is the Official Language of the Union, provision was made in the Constitution that English would be used in official work until 1965, after which Hindi would replace it. Because of the opposition of the Dravidian south against Hindi, the Indian Government decided to further extend the role of English as an additional language with Hindi to be used for purposes of the Union and in Parliament. (Official Languages Act of 1963, as amended in 1967.) English is now recognized as an associate official language, with Hindi the official language. It is recognized as the official language in four states (Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura) and in eight Union territories.

### **English Language and Journalism in India:**

The English press in India initiated serious journalism in the country. The number of English newspapers, journals and magazines is on the increase. According to Kachru (1986b:12), at present there are 3,582 Indian newspapers in English. English-language newspapers are published in practically all states of the Republic. Of a total of 19,144 newspapers registered in India in 1982, those in English accounted for 18.7 percent, whereas the newspapers in Hindi accounted for 27.8 percent.

India is the third largest English book-producing country after the United States and the United Kingdom, and the largest number of books are published in English. Creative writing in English is considered an integral part of the literary traditions in South Asia. Indeed, according to the words of an Indian critic Iyengar three decades ago, quoted by Kachru, there seems to be an acceptance of Indian English literature as "one of the voices in which India speaks...it is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as the others" (Kachru 1994:528-529). Sanyal claims, too, that Indian writing represents a new form of Indian culture. It has become assimilated and is today a dynamic element of the culture (Sanyal 1987: 7).

The thematic range of literatures has been extended in India: in fact, Kachru points out that English has functioned "as the main agent for releasing the South Asian languages from the rigorous constraints of the classical literary traditions". English has created new experimentation in the field of Indian writing (Kachru 1994: 535-536). Kachru points out that the linguistic centre of English has shifted. This means that English no longer only represents the Judeo-Christian traditions and Western concepts of literary creativity. The ranges of English have expanded, as the varieties within a variety have been formed (Kachru 1986a: 130-131).

### **English Language Development In India:**

With such diversity in languages and educational needs of the people, educators in didn't have to seriously look at the English language development in terms of language proficiency as well as academic performance. Though methods/programs found useful in the U.S schools may not be directly applicable to us they do provide some useful insights into ELD among our school children. They highlight the importance of continuous improvisation of teaching methodologies/programme, development of teachers, competence, systematic language evaluation as well as academic success. Concepts based on language acquisition in terms of development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency can be useful in the designing English Language development Programmes.

Now the following questions arise: are some Indian schools overzealous of teaching English language neglect the proficiency in the primary language? Also, do we have a subgroup of children who at the end of 12 years of English medium education neither have proficiency in English nor perform well in academics? If yes, how we overcome such problems? Can two-language/dual immersion programme (primary language and English) be effective in Indian schools? Systematic study in these areas may help educators develop academic success in multi-linguistic environment leading to the mastery in English.

To day, English language has been selected as one of the skills and prescribed in most of the competitive examinations in government as well as private. What parents, employers and employee looking nowadays are Verbal Skills, Communication Skills, and Soft skills, these all are the areas where English language rules.

Here are a few ways to improve English that every common learner and speaker forget:  
**Here's How:**

1. Remember that learning a language is a gradual process - it does not happen overnight.
2. Define your learning objectives early: What do you want to learn and why?

3. Make learning a habit. Try to learn something every day. It is much better to study (or read, or listen to English news, etc.) 10 minutes each day than to study for 2 hours once a week.
4. Remember to make learning a habit! If you study each day for 10 minutes English will be constantly in your head. If you study once a week, English will not be as present in your mind.
5. Choose your materials well. You will need reading, grammar, writing, speaking and listening materials
6. Vary your learning routine. It is best to do different things each day to help keep the various relationships between each area active. In other words, don't just study grammar.
7. Find friends to study and speak with. Learning English together can be very encouraging.
8. Choose listening and reading materials that relate to what you are interested in. Being interested in the subject will make learning more enjoyable - thus more effective.
9. Relate grammar to practical usage. Grammar by itself does not help you USE the language. You should practice what you are learning by employing it actively.
10. Move your mouth! Understanding something doesn't mean the muscles of your mouth can produce the sounds. Practice speaking what you are learning aloud. It may seem strange, but it is very effective.
11. Be patient with yourself. Remember learning is a process - speaking a language well takes time. It is not a computer that is either on or off!
12. Communicate! There is nothing like communicating in English and being successful. Grammar exercises are good - having your friend on the other side of the world understand your email is fantastic!
13. Use the Internet. The Internet is the most exciting, unlimited English resource that anyone could imagine and it is right at your finger tips.

### **Tips:**

1. Remember that English learning is a Process
2. Be patient with yourself.
3. Practice, practice, practice

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