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THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

Languages are important in the life of any nation. The members of a social group need language to communicate with each other, for all social purposes, for public administration, for commerce and industry, for education and so on. Ours is a country with Multilingual, Multicultural, and pluralistic milieu. Social aspirations can best be fulfilled when they are allowed to function through the mother tongue. Therefore it is natural to think of mother tongue for the purpose of education. But the necessity to have a common language for interaction has led to the learning of English. The English language is a powerful force not just for economics, business, and trade, but for mutual respect and progress. It is also becoming the common future of human commerce and communication. English is the best tool to provide good opportunity for the learner to learn. This is also the language of instruction in all the Universities and colleges across the country. The scenario is such that one needs to polish the skills of English to obtain a job. Mere knowledge of subjects is no more the only criteria to secure a job in today's date. With the growing globalization, one must definitely be able to communicate in English and should have a good English vocabulary, if one wants to go across the country for educational or job purposes.

Thus, though a foreign language, English occupies a unique position in the Indian educational system. Even after independence, it continues to be a major language having a prestigious position in our society. This chapter attempts to focus attention on the role of the English language and the changing needs of English language teaching and learning in India. English speaking and English listening are given a very high priority in the Indian educational system. The elite society in India sends their children to English-medium schools and even the poorest of the poor aspire to send their children to the same since English is seen as a language that provides upward economic and social mobility.

Due to its association with the British colonizer, English started life in India as not just a foreign language but as a much-hated language. From the despised instrument of oppression to the reluctantly adopted lingua franca to the status symbol of upper classes to its position today as a second language, English has come a long way. In fact, it would not be an



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aberration to label it a first language of some prejudiced of Indian society. In the closing years of twentieth century, when English began to emerge as the global language, the Indian classroom was transformed because of the change in the environment of the learner. 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 centres that need trainers to equip their employees with communication skills; there are multinationals which have been recruiting marketing staff that needed to be taught spoken English; there are medical transcription centres which need efficient translators and reporters; there are those desirous of immigrating to the west needing professional help for clearing tests. Hence the avenues where ELT (English Language Teaching) came to be required in India are unlimited today. The change was first observed at social, political and economic levels. Suddenly, English ceased to be the badge of status for the upper crest. 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 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 lifestyle becoming a tempting option. In India, language evokes emotive feelings. People deify their languages and begin to worship them. They personify their languages as goddesses or divine beings. They would like to show their devotion and loyalty to their languages in several ways, often singing in their praise. Since languages are elevated to the divine status, people are often unwilling to look at their language critically and accept the necessary reforms needed to modernize their languages. While things have been changing a bit in recent years, the teaching and learning strategies have not made much progress. Since our tradition emphasizes memorization of everything, the focus in language teaching continues to be on memorization of the verses and essays. Literature is equated to language, is equated to language, and pre-occupation with the correctness of usage takes precedence over the creative and innovative usage and effective communication. Language teaching does not adequately prepare our students to write



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materials that address day-to-day functional needs. There is a growing trend in every Indian language, including Tamil that tries to bridge the gap between the standard or written form of the language and the spoken forms. We have traditionally believed in the superiority of the written speech, and our teaching emphasizes the acquisition of written standards. This was possible in the past because things were accepted just as they were presented; the authority of the grammarian was highly respected.

Speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners would face. In spite of this, it has traditionally been forced into the background while teachers of English, have spent all the classroom time trying to teach students how to write, to read and sometimes even to listen. English speaking is generally thought to be the most important of the four skills. This skill is the most complicated due to the fact that non-native speakers have to interpret not only the message that other speakers try to express, but also take into account other possibilities.

Contrary to what everybody thinks about foreign language learning, listening competence is wider than speaking competence. It has taken many years to give the listening skill the importance it deserves in second and foreign language learning among the teaching profession. This is the reason why recently, the language teaching profession has brought into focus on English listening comprehension. English is the only language which is understood by educated people all over the country. English speaking and English listening are needed not just for operational purposes but also for identifying oneself with those who use the language in India and abroad.

According to Dr. S. Radha Krishnan Commission on Education "English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world and we will act unwisely if we allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance".