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Impact of English Language Proficiency on Students' Academic Achievement in India and the Role of Social Justice in Education

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Abstract

The perception of the English language has witnessed various reproaches, as well as its propagation since it arrived at the British East India Company. The English language brings a load of questions—its impact on Indian languages and cultures and the pattern of education in India, which even today is dominated by certain communities and sections of society, making the setting of the English curriculum irregular and to a certain extent redundant across universities in India. Besides the cultural aspect, the socio-economic impact of English has also gained prominence. The English language has become a prominent lingua franca in the globalized world. As countries with English as a second or foreign language are aspiring and flourishing in industries and higher education, the use and importance of English is increasing. Hence, as an educator, my concern trickles down to the students learning in the schools of India and their academic achievements, which are influenced by the learning and expertise of English. This research report studies the impact of expecting proficiency in the English language on students' academic achievements and, thereby, the role of social justice pedagogy in teacher training to bolster the learning experiences of students. It also results in generating deeper insights towards the growth and well-being of the larger world. To gain further insight into this study, the research incorporates interviews with five students and their families. The sample includes Indian middle-income families from the same locality in Thane, a cosmopolitan and multilingual setup, and all the students enrolled in English-medium schools. There are only two differences: one, the students belong to different age groups, and two, they are raised in different linguistic backgrounds.

Keywords: Social justice, English language proficiency, teacher education.

Introduction

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela

English education has always been in the hands of privileged communities, either religious or caste-based; in many cases, gender-based. Since the English language has value in all aspects of life, every person must be fairly and justly educated and trained to qualify in English. To do so, every learner's background, aspiration, and passion must be accepted and understood. This shall enable all the students to fulfill their potential and needs with the help of society. This makes Social justice in English education the need of the hour.

Teacher Education Colleges may add Social Justice as one of the components to sensitize preservice as well as in-service teachers to the multiple subjectivities¹ of society. As a teacher goes deep into the study of social justice as a pedagogy, the teacher realizes a lot of subtle differences and myths prevailing in society and transitions into an educator who is a leader in the classroom, often also in the larger society.

Hence, this research is undertaken to deepen and widen the horizons of teachers towards the cultural and social factors that their students are a part of.

Concept of Social Justice in English Education

The disposition of teachers and school curriculum must possess the attitude and behavior of equity and inclusivity to cater to every student. Additionally, since schools in India are largely English-language oriented² when it comes to English education, schools must not discriminate against students if they have shifted from vernacular mediums; encourage students who are first-generation English learners with a deep understanding of their unique situation and use creative methods; and make sure that students with a better grasp of English help their peers with low proficiency. There can be discussions on the evolution and impact of English education. Through social justice strategy and understanding the historical, cultural, and international influences of English, students might be curious to learn about the inequalities prevailing in society and will work on how to bridge those gaps.

Background of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the place of social justice in English education. It focuses on the present condition of relating social justice to teaching and learning English and points out the issues faced by students. The research is intended to present a uniform understanding of social justice in English education.

¹ Subjectivism is the doctrine that “our own mental activity is the only unquestionable fact of our experience,” instead of shared or communal, and that there is no external or objective truth. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

² adjust or tailor (something) to specified circumstances or needs

The research was developed through literature searches of previous studies, articles, in-depth case studies, and an academic course on social justice in education. The main body of the research report consists of case studies.

Literature Review

Taking a strong stance against the controversy engulfed around Social Justice Education, Janet Alsop, and SJ Miller, in their paper *Reclaiming English Education: Rooting Social Justice in Dispositions*, elucidate on Social Justice Education. "In other words, social justice isn't just a euphemism for liberal politics. It isn't a way to exclude a group of preservice teachers who belong to a certain political party or vote a certain way. It is a way of approaching public education and teacher education that ensures that it will be as open and equitable as possible to all children, regardless of their identities, biology, or experience." (Alsop & Miller, p199)

The paper reinstates, "A social justice orientation to teaching and learning is complex, requires the activation of multiple subjectivities, and may take time to develop." (Alsop & Miller, p205)

Carr in his paper, *Educating for Democracy: With or without Social Justice*, adds,

"Dantley and Tillman (2006) provide a detailed review of the social justice literature, emphasizing a range of salient considerations. For instance, they focus on the "education of the other," "education about the other," and "education that is critical of privileging and othering" (citing Kumashiro) and "emphasize moral values, justice, equity, care, and respect and the imperative for investigating the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on the educational outcomes of students," with particular attention paid to marginalized groups (Dantley & Tillman, 2006:18-19). Stressing "moral transformative leadership," they identify three key components: "a progressive or critical theoretical perspective," a deconstruction of the practical realities and perpetuation of "in equities and the marginalization of members of the learning community who are outside the dominant culture," and, lastly, the need to view schools "as sites that not only engage in academic pursuits but also as locations that help to create activists to bring about the democratic reconstruction of society" (p. 19). The final area of focus for Dantley and Tillman (2006) is social justice praxis (Freire, 1973), linking the "principles of democracy and equity in proactive ways so that the social justice agenda becomes a vibrant part of the everyday work of school leaders" (p. 20). The meshing of theory and practice speaks to the foundation of critical engagement, as enunciated in Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) seminal work on the subject" (Carr, p. 120).

The related research papers have specified educators' behaviour and work towards democracy and raise the question if the teacher should be politically aware and involved. They have purposefully sidelined the respective content knowledge of the teacher and whether the teacher has undergone the right training in teacher education besides social justice as a pedagogy in teacher education.

Since this paper's focus is to ascertain Social Justice Education in English as an academic subject, there have been studies done on the growth and impact of English in India in the papers: *Mimicry, Masculinity, and the Mystique of Indian English: Western India, 1870-1900* by Shefali Chandra and *English in a Post-Colonial Situation: The Example of India* by R.K. Gupta.

Chandra adds in her paper,

“Methodologically, I seek to infuse the social history of class and caste power in western India with an analysis of the contestation over the meaning of cultural forms. Indian English came to be materially and symbolically aligned with the management of cultural mimicry, masculinity, and heterosexual affect. In turn, some Indians heightened their “indigenous” class, caste, and heteronationalist power by extending the authority of Indian English into sexually differentiated spaces. In other words, by deploying English to bolster a new and self-consciously “native” identity.” (Chandra, p200)

She further continues, “Indeed, by 1860, English education significantly "rewrote not just the lives of those with access to colonial schools and an English education... [T]he majority encountered English as a condition that denied them knowledge and power" (Naregal 2001, 69). Altogether, the experience of lack was integrally enmeshed within the psychic project of English studies.” Chandra also states the example of Ramabai Ranade in learning English and the shaming that she had to undergo, ironically by women themselves.

In the paper, *English in a Post-Colonial Situation: The Example of India*, Gupta gives a view of the approach Indians have towards English. “Two major arguments used against English were, first, that it symbolized the most exploitative aspects of colonialism and even now continues to be a means of intellectual and cultural enslavement, and second, that it retarded the growth of Indian languages (Viswana rather than Devy).” (Gupta, p74) Lastly, he adds,

“Thus mired in uncertainty and controversy, the teaching of English in India lacks a sense of direction. The confusion regarding the role of English is reflected in the way it is taught. Because students with widely varying backgrounds and competence in English enter the universities and are herded together in a single class room, courses in English are geared to those at the lowest level and so tend to be repetitive and circular rather than sequential and progressive. The labors of English teachers thus often take on a Sisyphean character.” (Gupta, p76)

These two papers on English education emphasize the importance of social justice in classrooms. The various backgrounds and the class differences in the classroom call for a deeper understanding of each student's potential and needs. Preservice teachers must be trained in assimilating social justice in English education.

In the paper, *Exploring Preservice Teachers' Perception about Social Justice* by Takshashila Jadhav, a survey was conducted to assess preservice teachers' awareness of social

justice. This is the first step towards including social justice as one of the major tools of teacher training. It was found in the survey conducted,

“Discussion shows that pre-service teachers are not thoroughly aware of how to foster social justice through education. In the present paper, the researcher has tried to understand the present-level understanding of social justice of the pre-service teachers; further research can be conducted by devising a social justice program and then checking whether that has helped in bringing a positive change in the narrow outlook of the pre-service teachers perception about social justice.” (Jadhav, p126)

Social Justice Education is a must in the College of Education for teachers to be oriented early on about social justice in the classroom and subject specialization.

Need of the Study

Education plays a pivotal role in the growth of our society. To understand deeply the functioning of the system and its philosophical base, this study is being undertaken. The approach of the study is through the lens of social justice.

Also, English education is a major influence on education, and social justice is an ideology that aims for justice and equity at the social level. To understand the meeting point of social justice and English education, this research has been undertaken. As an educator of English, I have delved into the intricacies of the language to understand its impact on the social fabric of India, specifically academic progress.

Social Justice and the Importance of English Language Proficiency on Students' Academic Achievement

What the soul sees and has experienced, that it knows; the rest is appearance, prejudice, and opinion.

— Sri Aurobindo

Operational definition of the variables:

1. Language Proficiency: The expertise of a person in a language.
2. Linguistic Background: Language spoken in the person's immediate surroundings, i.e., household. For example, Marathi, Hindi, and Telugu.
3. Post-Colonial Situation: The impact of British Colonialism in India, specifically language.
4. Equity: justice and fairness.
5. Inclusive: a practice that considers everyone's perspectives.
6. Teaching Methods: Strategy used to introduce and elaborate a topic to learners.
7. Academic Achievement: A student's achievement in terms of marks and grades in school.

8. English Education: English language learning and teaching process to make students good at communication and presentation.

Research Questions:

- What is the influence of English language proficiency on students' academic achievement?
- What is the role of social justice in education?

Sample and Sampling Method:

The Participants: I chose five neighboring school-going children. The sample includes Indian middle-income families from the same locality in Thane, a cosmopolitan and multilingual setup, and all the students enrolled in English-medium schools. There were only two differences: one, the students belonged to different age groups, and two, they were raised in different linguistic backgrounds. This helped me gain insights into almost all classes going through the same process but with different experiences. In the paper, the names of the participants have been changed to respect their privacy.

Both students and their parents were involved in the project. The students were selected based on their age groups and linguistic backgrounds. Since I aimed to study data from all the sections of the school (from pre-primary to higher secondary) and also from varied linguistic backgrounds, I chose the above-mentioned sample.

The students' age range is from 3 years to 16 years old. Almost everybody can read and write in basic English. The students are from educated families who aspire to work in various professions of their liking. Lastly, they speak different languages of India, namely, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, and Telugu. All students study at the Central Board of Secondary Education.

Tools for the Present Study

There was a set of interview questions for both students and their parents. It was an informal assessment as the questions to assess the students' knowledge and skill level were based on observing their speaking, conceptual understanding of English lessons in the classroom, parent's observations of their children's experiences in learning in school, specifically grasping English, and lastly, by asking questions on children and their parents understanding and value of language proficiency in academics as well as life.

Data Collection:

First, the families in my locality were selected. I drafted consent forms for the families to read about the project and the terms and conditions that would be followed. Questions pertaining to the research were clarified before collecting their consent and beginning the interview and case study.

Data analysis

I prepared interview questions for the sample. As I began framing the questionnaire, I realized that interviewing students and parents required set parameters and a common ground to compare and analyze the data. I visited each household to take the interview, which also gave me a closer view of the students' study patterns.

I asked questions and wrote the answers in my journal. The data was organized grade-wise, from low to high.

Research Findings

Ritu Yadav, a class 3 student, shared her experience with English learning. Raised in a Marathi-speaking household, she expressed her slight difficulty with understanding English, but when compared to Hindi, she found it easier. When asked for the reason, she said that spelling and punctuation were easy to follow in English. Upon talking to her mother, I learned that Ritu is home-tutored and regularly practices writing in English, which keeps her at an average level in class. Interestingly, when I asked her if she would like to learn subjects in Marathi or Hindi, she vehemently refused and said that she loved English despite its difficulties because her English teacher is jovial and humorous and narrates mesmerizing stories in class. No other teacher does that. It says that if the teacher is interactive, the students feel comfortable learning, even if it is a second language. Alsop and Miller in their paper write, A social justice orientation is often seen as a component of a desired disposition for an ELA teacher, both in English education methods classes around the nation and in NCTE³ units and SPA⁴ standards. In a world of assessing knowledge, skills, and dispositions, owning a social justice stance is most clearly a personal/professional disposition, a hard-to-define quality that is supposed to create a good teacher.” (Alsop&Miller, p200)

Next, I interviewed Sachin Yadav, a class 1 student and brother of Ritu Yadav, to find out if his experience was like that of his elder sister studying at the same school. It turns out that Sachin has better help when it comes to using English. During exams, Sachin writes directly on the question paper, so it becomes quicker to understand English, and the fear of memorizing is eliminated. On the other hand, Ritu has to write on answer papers. Sachin's experience is a little different. His teacher helps their class write answers using the method of repetition. Whereas for Ritu, the teacher may solve her doubts, but there is no dictating and repeating of questions and answers. As I spoke to their mother, I sensed that even though she and the father were educated in Marathi medium schools, they had a positive return to English medium schools because the father worked as a software professional, which looks for English proficiency.

In the paper published in the Economic Development and Cultural Change journal of The University of Chicago Press: The Returns to English-Language Skills in India (January 2013) by Mehtabul Azam, Aimee Chin, and Nishith Prakash, while elaborating previous studies that discuss the relationship between English-language skills and earnings in India, they wrote,

³ National Council for Teacher Education

⁴ Specialised Professional Association

Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006) and Chakraborty and Kapur (2008), with the latter being an unpublished manuscript. Both estimate the returns to attending school with English (as opposed to some native language) as the medium of instruction. Munshi and Rosenzweig collected their data on Maharashtrians living in Dadar, which is located in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. Using data on parents' income histories and the language of instruction in their secondary school (Marathi or English), they estimate significant positive returns to an English-medium education. Attending an English-medium school increased both women's and men's income by about 25% in 2000. Chakraborty and Kapur use National Sample Survey data to estimate the impact of a 1983 policy in West Bengal that eliminated English as the medium of instruction in primary schools. They find that switching from English to Bengali as the medium of instruction significantly reduced wages. Simple comparisons of cohorts attending primary school before and after policy change suggest that English-medium schooling raised wages by about 15% in the 2000s. (Azam pp341-342)

Soon, I interviewed a Class 10 student, Lata Gandhi. I found her perception of English-medium education to be similar to the above-researched data. She said that studying in English-medium schools gives a good profile for job interviews. Besides that, there is a marked difference in the way the student carries himself or herself when he or she is proficient in English. It improves the individual's expression. Also, Lata belongs to a Telugu-speaking family, and her father is a PhD in Chemical Engineering (English medium). According to her parents' observations, she is not as fluent in English as a teenager should be before finishing school. The mother points out Lata's overuse of Hindi with her peers, which is also impacting her academic performance. Lata's English is not as enchanting as that of the earlier primary student, Ritu. Lata feels Hindi is easier to learn and connect with. For her English studies, she is tutored in extra classes, where she practices by writing and working on vocabulary building. To her, English becomes enjoyable when it focuses on writing skills, asks for her feelings on issues, and is creative. From this, I understood that English can preserve as well as bolster the Indianness of Indian English if it is standardized⁵.

What students like Lata and Ritu are looking for while studying English can be partly understood upon reading the paper by Ankur Betageri published in 2017: A Case for the Standardization of Indian English. He writes,

We need Standard Indian English: (i) To acknowledge the Indianness of Indian English, which means to acknowledge it as an acculturated Indian language and to end its problematic status as a second or foreign language that derives its authenticity from foreign sources, that is, standard varieties of British English and American English. (ii) To acknowledge that nationalistically defined Standard British English and Standard American English as global standards—by privileging the general over the particular, the same and similar over the different, and the cliched over the singular—hamper and stultify the creative evolution of Indian English. (iii) To nurture the creative potential of Indian English, which would humanize and democratize the language, which is being primarily used by the institutions of state and corporations as a language of power to ensure the subordination and obedience of people. (Betageri, p. 171)

⁵ The goal of standardization is to ensure uniformity to certain practices within the industry. Source:<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com>

Shortly, I interviewed another primary student, Leena Varghese of Class 4. She is completely comfortable with English, more so than in Hindi. Her native language is Malayalam, but she has had a knack for the English language ever since she listened to her parents speak in English as a toddler. Unlike many English as a second language learners, Leena finds it easy to understand concepts in English. Her average score is high. When I quizzed her on the current lesson being taught in class, verbs, she could answer 2 out of 3 questions instantly. Her mother reported that when she entered the primary section, Leena's love for reading English books had grown. She often reads to them at night. She is confident in English but is afraid of Marathi. She finds it difficult to understand. Lucky for her, her parents motivate her to learn as much as she can and do not pressure her. This also gives us an understanding that English is just one more language that people like Leena find easy to adapt to, despite living in Maharashtra, and when parents encourage the talents of their children, they are motivated to excel academically.

My last case study is of another secondary student, Drishti Dinesh, a class 7 student. To her, the English language and its study are boring. She was raised in a Tamil-speaking family, but her peers interact in Hindi. She elaborated that initially, learning English was interesting because of its novelty. Now, the teaching and learning of English are repetitive and confusing. She added that although English seemed tough sometimes, she would still choose to learn in English and not Tamil. She feels a little more familiar with understanding concepts in English, considering she lives in a metropolitan area where there are very few Tamilians who will help her improve her Tamil proficiency. Upon talking to her mother, it became clearer that although Drishti manages somewhat academically when it comes to an in-depth understanding of the subject, she reaches out to her parents, who speak to her in Tamil. First, they believe that she should preserve her Tamil language and culture, and second, she can freely express her feelings in her native language (she is sometimes hesitant to consult her teachers in school). Her mother also expressed concern about school boards and how vernacular boards are looked down upon. She shared her apprehension about sending her daughter to government schools, as those are deemed inadequate these days. Lastly, she also mentioned that some schools that are religious minorities give preference only to the religious minority, specifically the convent schools; this leaves the child behind in terms of proper English education.

Betageri rightly affirms the personality and the need for standardization of Indian English.

“Indian English can play a very important role in connecting different linguistic communities and cultures, but its characterization as a minor language of British and American Englishes has made it the killer language of globalization, which can only be local and particular by mocking and caricaturing itself. This hollowing out of the language through commercialization and its use as a capitalistic vehicle for the imposition of forms of life that are alienating and uprooting can only be resisted by helping it develop into a language of creativity and daily speech. And a language can develop creatively when—once it has developed into a variation that is significant and singular—it is freed from a system of homogenization that is distant and alien, and in this case when Indian English is freed from undergoing a homogenization with either British English or American English.” (Betageri, pp179-180)

Conclusion

The English language can be either a joyful or deterring experience for the student, depending on the teaching approach, which can be more inclusive and equitable with social justice. The importance of English language proficiency depends on the education approach of teachers, the environment at home, the interest of the student, and lastly, the market value of the language. Learners of English become active contributors to society with a grounding in communication and social justice as a component of knowledge and skill. It is also important to examine whether English is just a second language or a means to higher achievements. Globally, English is viewed as among the better modes of transaction because of the far-reaching colonial power of the then-British Empire. If we see the variations in the English language now, we will find British English to be different from, say, American or Australian English. It can be learned either as a second or foreign language. On the other hand, Indian English has its personality, and it keeps updating itself.

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