



English Education in British India: The Strategic Adoption and Positioning of English Language in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses British ventures for English education in the Indian subcontinent which had signified the inevitable relevance of English language both for education policy and practice. Looking at the phenomena in pre-19th century context, English language was introduced in the subcontinent for the sake of training Indian interpreters who could also act as mediators between other Indians and the British officers of East India Company. During 19th century, after establishing their rule over the Indian subcontinent, English education was being used as a vehicle of colonial enlightenment. Those were times when English language was introduced as a taught subject side by side with vernacular subjects in schools. While early 20th century had witnessed demands for educational change from within and from without, English language had sustained its status as a compulsory taught subject in schools even as a part of the suggested revisions in education system of the subcontinent. Based on primary data evidence from the public record files of the then Ministry of Education and of Education Commissions, conferences, etc. comprising of British officers and educated Indian leaders, this article provides a significant insight into why and how the British official vision for strategising English language in the mainstream school education of the subcontinent was being carried out.



Introduction

The history of English language adoption in the colonised world is often traced side by side with the expansionist colonial aims of the 15th century. For instance, Fujimoto-Adamson believes that European imperialism may be equated with 'linguistic imperialism' (2006, p. 261). Hence, caution must be exercised when analysing the case of English language in colonised countries as being 'ideologically neutral' (Phillipson, 2009, p. 8). Certainly, there is no difference of opinion among the analysts emphasising that English language had established its significance in the colonial settings, both by the European colonisers and their ruled populations. In this reference, the case of British India is highly significant especially when the history of English language depicts upholding the cause of establishing modern English education in India. Equally relevant becomes presenting an analysis of why, and how English language was being introduced in the first instance and from when and how it could maintain its significant status among compulsory knowledge forms being adopted for secondary education in India. Based on the primary and secondary data source findings, the following provides an historical analysis of these research considerations:

British Colonial aims in India and English Language

By the early 18th century, the British government had successfully set the groundwork for expanding and maintaining its 'sea-borne empire' in India (Travers, 2007, p. 33). And it was no later than the mid-18th century when the British Government had maintained its extensive control over Indian territory. Those were times when the British in India understood with a strong conviction and zeal that Indians should be trained in those useful knowledge forms that would ensure their capacity building to communicate in English with the British in India. Hence, it was decided that Indians be familiarised with English education. Initially, with the help of missionaries and of the East India Company, the training of Indians in English language was being carried out for getting native interpreters and instructors of oriental languages. As called 'moonshees', such trained Indians had acted as facilitators for the British government in exploring Indian civilisation and more importantly in serving as a bridge between the East India Company and local population (Sangwan, 1990, pp. 81-82; Kochhar, 1992, p.2610). There was a gradual change in the objectives of training into English language; that is, training in English language was going to serve as a tool for English education preparing a select few Indians performing jobs of administrative clerks for the British administration in India (Kochhar, 1992, p. 2611). Moreover, through such training the East India Company had also successfully enabled both Muslims and Hindus serving the British judicial administration in presidencies as law-officers (Mukerji, 1962, p. 3). Things further changed in the last quarter of 18th century, when the British announced their claims for introducing 'a modern era of colonial enlightenment' in the Indian subcontinent (Travers, 2007, p. 244). The aspired enlightenment had meant education along Western and not along Oriental lines. And 19th century was a witness to such assertions.

English Education as an instrument of Colonial Enlightenment

During the 19th century, British efforts for introducing modern education in India had taken pace (Desai, 2005, p. 129). Muir writes with clarity that the Charter Act of 1813 was a practical manifestation for such aspirations, which signified that Western knowledge could promise 'social good' and curb the 'social evils' prevalent in Indian society (1915, p. 279). Explaining the case of such education policy, Dobbin refers towards the firm conviction of Lord Macaulay in his Minute of 1835, the then President of the General Committee of Public Instruction; who explicated that undoubtedly the aspired educational objectives could be ensured by adopting English knowledge (1970, p. 17). Lord Macaulay had a strong conviction that, 'a single shelf of a good European Library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia', and therefore only English education could prepare 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (cited in Dobbin, 1970, pp. 17-18). His firm devotion to the cause of English education in India was also visible in his belief that the then Indian education system had failed to accelerate the progress of truth and had rather slowed down 'the natural death of expiring errors' (Sangwan, 1990, p. 85).

Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India, also supported the British aims of promoting European literature and science among the natives of India. He announced that all the funds being approved for education would be spent completely on English education (Bhutt and Aggarwal, 1969, p. 4; Malik, 1992, p. 26; Qureshi, 1956, p. 26). Although Indian Muslims had reacted against the British policy of spreading purely Western knowledge, the British government had dealt with such resistance by increasing their control over educational activities. For instance, educational endowments in Sind were being confiscated, while in Bengal about one-fourth of the area of Bengal presidency area was taken away that used to be meant for endowments towards educational and other charitable activities (Ahmad, 1970, p. 168). Ahmad further states that from 1849 onwards, the British involvement in Punjab had also adversely effected educational grants (1970, p. 194). On becoming the Governor-General for India in 1836, Lord Auckland announced his decision to allow the survival of institutions of oriental learning along with those institutions which had aimed at disseminating English learning (Biswas and Biswas, 1994, p. 21). Certainly, the early beginnings of British government's active involvement in the socio-political life of Indians had required Indian support. With the passage of time, British were in better position to exercise their control over Indian educational affairs.

Since the second half of 19th century, the Anglicisation of education in India had received impetus when grants-in-aid were only provided to the missionary schools; because their syllabi were prescribed by the public instruction department and the Company's inspectors used to inspect their on-going activities (Sherwani, 1994, p. 337). Similarly, the Despatch of 1854 had announced government's decision of adopting the form of secondary education that was more 'practically useful to the people of India in their different spheres of life' (Peshkin, 1963, p. 4; Malik, 1992, p. 27). To an analyst, while behind such utilitarian aims

were training for their effective rule over India, the despatch had identified the necessity of adopting a diversified, utilitarian school curriculum promising ‘more opportunities than’ then had existed for the acquisition of ‘such an improved education’ (Peshkin, 1963, p. 4). The Despatch had further recognised that it was the duty of state to make provisions for ‘the systematic promotion of general education’ through ‘diffusion of the arts, science, philosophy, and literature of Europe’ (Nathan, 1904, p. 457).

In the following decades, adopting mass education policy, the ground was set to change prevailing indigenous education system into a modern education system looking after the aims of the British Empire (Kumar, 2005, p. 49; Kumar, 1985, p. 1281). Presenting a comprehensive report about education in India, the Education Commission of 1882 had rightly indicated a marked rise in number of English schools vis-à-vis Classical and Vernacular schools in nearly all provinces of the subcontinent (Report of Indian Education Commission 1882, 1883, p. 228). Similarly, providing facts and figures about students learning English and other languages, the Commission explicated that although there was a ‘perceptible’ proportion of students not learning English in private schools, in Government High schools ‘practically’ every student was learning English (Report of Indian Education Commission 1882, 1883, p. 229). By the end of 19th century, the re-configuration of secondary curriculum for the Matriculation examination was adopted in different provincial universities in control of secondary education. That had also led to deciding about compulsory subjects for secondary schools; which comprised of English; Mathematics; History and Geography; and a second language. Second language options were comprised of ‘an oriental or European classical language’; ‘an Indian or continental European vernacular language’ (Nathan, 1904, p. 116). Saying this, at provincial levels, there were some differences in subjects offered. The province of Punjab had introduced a fifth subject which could be chosen out of a subjects’ list including vernacular language, elementary science, or a second classical language.

The English secondary course was divided into a middle and a high stage, that were however differently adopted in provinces. As for English language learning in schools, the Education Ministry of Government of Bengal had expressed their satisfaction over the popularity of English language among students during the ending years of 19th century (1902, p. 26). In Punjab, English had also attained its status as a compulsory subject in courses like Punjab Clerical and Commercial Course and the Science Entrance Course offered in secondary schools working under University of Punjab jurisdiction (Nathan, 1904, p. 121). By the end of 19th century, English language as a subject had maintained its status as a compulsory subject even in courses of practical utility side by side with academic courses.

Moreover, the trend of increase in English Secondary schools vis-à-vis Vernacular Secondary schools had also gained pace. In provinces like Bengal, there was a steady rise in the number of English Secondary schools for the reason being that many Vernacular Secondary schools were being converted into English Secondary schools (Government of Bengal, 1902, p. 26). In other provinces like Punjab and Burma only, their respective Vernacular secondary courses were offered at secondary levels of education (Nathan, 1904, p. 114). English language had moved on, along with general educational developments to threshold of 20th century, depicting a practical manifestation of British Government’s keen prerogative in shaping modern education in India. Saying this, the real challenge facing British government in India was with reference to an effective implementation of English education in the mainstream secondary schools of the subcontinent. One of the practical manifestations for such an arduous task was the prevalent debate about the medium of instruction in English schools. Reporting about the progress of education in India during 1897 to 1902, the British Government in India conceded to the controversial state of affairs; that there was a disagreement between the Despatch of 1854 and recommendations proposed by the Education Commission of 1882 in their emphasis on adopting English as a medium of instruction in early school years (Nathan, 1904, p. 115). Since the provinces had tried adopting the policy of medium of instruction in accordance with the recommendations, equal standards of English language acquisition and output could not be maintained. The situation further got unclear because English language was adopted as a medium of instruction in schools in different times. However, as the time went by, English language was able to have had maintained a higher status over other subjects in schools. During the quinquennium of 1896-1902, more hours were being allocated to English language learning in nearly all provinces.

Table. Time Division in the Highest Class of selected typical English High Schools teaching matriculation courses

Subject	Hours per week								
	Madras	Bombay	Bengal	United Provinces	Punjab	Lower Burma	Central Provinces	Assam	
English	9	10	9½	12	12	5¼	12	9½	
Classical Language	5	5	4	5c	5a	3¾ b	3⅓	3½	
Vernacular Language	5	-	1	1	d	-	-	1½	
Mathematics	6	4	6	6	9	6¼	5⅓	5	
History and Geography	5	5	5	6	6	8¼	4⅔	4½	
Science	4	4	1	5c	d	1½	-	½	
Drawing	1	-	2	-	d	-	1	1	
Total	35	28	28½	30	32	25	26⅔	25½	
	a	Science 5 hours is alternative with this subject							
	b	Classical or Vernacular Language							
	c	Science is alternative with Classical Language							
	d	In addition 4 hours for either Vernacular language, Science, or Drawing							

Source: Based on information from Nathan, R. Progress of Education in India, 1897=98-1 901=1902 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1904), p.117.

English language sustains its central position amid challenges and suggested revisions in education system

In 1904, defining a new education policy, the British Government in India signified that they had intended to train workers for every profession contributing to the development of fine arts and industry (Mukerji, 1962, p. 13). Compliance with such policy was visible in provinces like Punjab, where at least one high school was sustained in every district (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908, p. 138). However, the policy could not escape criticism from Indian leaders. In 1906, members attending the Calcutta Congress expressed their strong concerns over the lopsided preferential treatment of literary instruction versus other knowledge forms which should have been given due significance as was given to literary knowledge forms (Biswas and Agrawal, 1994, p. 37). The forum held significance because it presented Indian demands for developing an education system which could hold together literary, scientific and technical curricula. And they had also propagated that such curricula were required that were suitable for ‘the country on National lines and under National control, and directed towards the realisation of National destiny’ (Biswas and Agrawal, 1994, p. 37). Similar assertions were also visible on the platform of the All India Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental Conference of 1914 (Noreen, 2014, p. 56). The British Government had already conceded to such demands in their resolution of 1913 when announced that efforts shall be made towards adopting more practical and useful school curricula. For instance, meeting in 1917, the Conference of Directors of Public Instruction (CoDPI) discussed about educational needs and their corresponding compatibility with the societal wants in India. Certainly, amid on-going efforts for the educational overhaul, the status of English as a compulsory subject in schools had retained its significance among Indians and so among British in control of Indian education.

During World War I years, when jublations were being expressed over the increase in number of secondary schools ‘as a cheering sign of the growing recognition of the value of English education’, anxieties were also expressed over the lower standards of teaching in Middle English

(Anglo-Vernacular) Schools (Bureau of Education, 1916, p. 15). The Bureau of Education in India taking up to the task of improving quality of English teaching in ‘inferior English schools and variable standards of matriculation’ of India, suggested that an increase in the duration of secondary education could help in coping with the issue of ‘ill-prepared students’ intending to pursue higher education (1916, p. 13).

The report of the Calcutta University Commission (CUC henceforth) was also a practical manifestation for such consensus. Re-defining scheme of secondary curriculum effecting the School-leaving Certificate and Matriculation examination systems, the CUC reserved two compulsory papers for English language (CUC Report, 1923, p. 33). Referring to learning objectives, the CUC highlighted that students should ‘learn to express themselves accurately and simply in their mother tongue and, in India, in English also’ (CUC

Report, 1923, p. 91). The suggested scheme of CUC was comparable with the British government's 1917 regulations for the School Certificate Examination in England. The latter had required an examination of the three groups of subjects, including English subjects, foreign languages and science and mathematics. While the former was more pro-vocational in nature, the latter had aimed at ensuring 'a balance between the arts and sciences and the neglect of practical subjects in English secondary schools' until the suggested grouping system had ended in 1947 (Webster, 1976, p. 210).

In 1929, analysing the ten years of educational reforms in India, Hartog Committee reiterated that a diversified curriculum could be adopted for the vernacular middle schools which could deal effectively with the evils of Matriculation scheme of education. (Ghosh, 1995, p. 153). Similarly, with adopting vernacular in middle schools, both as a medium of instruction and of examination, it was felt that such developments shall lead towards overthrowing English education that was being adopted along Macaulayan emphasis on dissemination of western learning in India. Calcutta University sought for Government's endorsement for adopting vernacular as a medium of instruction for Matriculation examination; which were turned down for the fact that such action would compromise the already low standard of English imparted in schools (Mitra, and Zachariah, 1933, p. 39). In Punjab, the utility of vernacular education has lessened during 1930s; not only because of the conservative methods of their teaching but also for the reason being that the Anglo-vernacular schools had kept on rising during the 1930s (Government of Punjab, 1937, p. 37). Similarly, students who had received education in vernacular schools were not being able to secure jobs after they had completed their studies. To illustrate, the Multan Division's Inspector of Schools stated in distress:

'Some six years back the students passing the vernacular final examination could be employed as teachers or patwaris, but it is very difficult to get these jobs now. Besides, demands of most of the industrial or professional institutions require some knowledge of English and hence Anglo-vernacular students are preferred to purely vernacular students' (Government of Punjab, 1937, p. 35).

In Bengal, the changing trends were also affecting madrassas. There was a growing interest among Muslim parents towards such Islamic education institutions (madrassas) where a hybrid system of Islamic knowledge and secular had existed education (Mitra, and Zachariah, 1933, p. 79). In September 1928, the Bengal's Board of Intermediate Education called a conference for the sake of aligning the syllabus of reformed madrassas with general education delivered in mainstream secondary schools. It was highlighted that while madrassas' curricula had been revised in many ways, certain changes were still needed in their subjects of English, Arabic, vernacular and mathematics (Mitra, and Zachariah, 1933, p. 82).

In December 1939, eminent educated Muslim leaders also met, at the annual session of All India Muslim Educational Conference to discuss and arrive at a consensual arrangement for education of Indian Muslims. In this reference, a committee was constituted comprising of well-known Muslim leaders some being proficient in English disciplines of law and arts from British universities of excellence, and others being members of the Indian Educational Service (Kamal Yar Jung Education Committee Report, 1942, p. 256). The Committee conducted a detailed examination of educational problems Muslims were facing and suggested a scheme of secondary education for Muslims. The scheme suggested that three types of secondary schools should be established in every province. These consisted of Secondary Schools for Arts and Science, Secondary Schools for Commerce, and Secondary Schools for Agriculture. It is interesting to note here that the committee had suggested English as a compulsory subject for all types of suggested school systems. Saying this, English language being adopted for different secondary school categories was going to be different. While literary English was suggested for secondary schools for arts and science. It was suggested that for Secondary Schools for Commerce, English language course should emphasise more on commercial correspondence, and précis writing; while for Secondary Schools for Agriculture, English course should emphasise Basic English (Kamal Yar Jung Education Committee, 1942, pp. 330-332). In fact, the British officials in control of universities themselves had also expressed their concerns about the prevailing problems of secondary education in India. They believed that education had provided 'an intellectual equipment' in hands of educated pupils which was 'admirable in itself but practically useless to them' (Siqueira, 1943, p. 74). In 1940s, the Inter-University Board of India resolved that every student should be examined in five general subjects comprising of Mother Tongue, English, Mathematics, Elementary Science, and History and Geography, while the optional subjects should be stretched for the last three years of the school course (Bureau of Education in India, 1944, pp. 22-23). Hence, the last decade of colonial rule in India spoke for an evidence that among the contending visions of Indians and the British Government for education, an emerging consensus had existed over carrying on with adopting English language as one of the compulsory subjects in India's secondary curriculum. It shall not be wrong to side with the claim that by 20th century, English language had moved strides towards becoming the lingua franca of British India

(Krishnaswamy, and Krishnaswamy, 2006, p. 74).

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