

English Lessons

Bridgehead to Greater Opportunities

Lead Article In "The Times Of India", January 13, 2000

John Kurrien

It is the English knowing people of India, constituting less than 20% of the population, who have mainly profited from the communications, education and entertainment opportunities provided by the Internet. They will also be the main beneficiaries of the large number of Web-related businesses and jobs that will soon be generated.

The more Indian languages one knows, the more effective one is likely to be in most walks of life in India. One of these languages should be English. For without functional communication skills in English, many avenues of employment are closed. This is obviously the case in most managerial positions and the professions. English is also often required for a range of lower level occupations. It is needed wherever computers are being used in India - shops, government organisations and industrial assembly lines.

The case for work-related English is not so obvious in contemporary rural India. But like their urban counterparts, rural people are increasingly using consumer products and drugs, whose labels and instructions are invariably in English. But as our villages get more and more integrated with the outside world, knowing English will become an important asset. The computerisation of rural India and the increasing commercialisation of agriculture, with a thrust towards export, will bring with it a growing need for English communication skills.

These trends are part of the ongoing liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy. In discussions on these emerging patterns, the 20% of Indians who know English are invariably viewed as providing India with a comparative advantage. On the contrary, a functional knowledge of English will be important for many many more Indians to know, especially the young, to meet the economic challenges of the next century.

English is absolutely necessary to function in the global economy and, unlike India, many governments and industries abroad therefore are actively promoting a widespread use of functional English. But luckily this reluctance on the part of our government to promote English is not one that is shared by many of our citizens.

Everybody seems to want to learn English, from street children in Mumbai to tribals in Bihar. Not surprising, given the importance of English in most walks of life. Aspirations for material possessions are now uniformly high in all strata of Indian society. Consequently, a whole range of private English medium schools have sprouted up all over urban and rural India. Many poor, but ambitious parents, living in urban slums and villages pay substantial fees to send their children to these schools, often nothing but substandard commercial teaching shops. Both knowledge and money allow the middle and upper classes to be more discriminating in their choice of schools. English medium boarding schools catering to the rural and urban middle classes and rich are flourishing.

The perceived need for English to improve one's social and economic position has also affected undergraduate and postgraduate education. The most prestigious courses in the humanities and sciences are still conducted in English. In professional education, English is almost exclusively the language of instruction. Selection procedures are heavily biased in favour of students knowing English.

So, should we be switching over the medium of instruction from regional languages to English in our schools, a recent option being considered by the J & K Government for government primary schools in the state? Or do we keep all the benefits of school education in the mother tongue, and ensure that most students acquire functional English communication skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing? Surely

the latter. Most regional medium schools in India teach English as a subject from the middle school stage onwards for five to six years. Good teaching in these years should ensure that most students at the end of Std. X should be competent in English.

But after 500-600 hours of instruction in English, many regional medium high school students are unable to speak, read or write even the most basic sentences in English. In Maharashtra, half of them fail in English at the SSC examinations, and thus in the examinations as a whole. English is also viewed as one of the most difficult subjects to pass in other states. Of the fortunate few who pass and join English medium colleges, many are haunted by their lack of English communication skills and diffident about improving them. Their college examination performance falls far below their innate potential, as their minimal English is rarely improved significantly by undergraduate English language courses.

So, what can be done ? A major contribution can be made if we improve the teaching of English in most of our regional medium schools, constituting the vast majority of urban and rural schools in the country. We need to begin at the middle school stage. Regional medium students in Stds. V or VI in their pre-teens are eager to learn English, and have the facility to acquire a reasonable proficiency quickly. But after about 3 years of about 300 hours of instruction, many get dispirited as they are barely able to speak, read or write a few simple English sentences.

But what can we expect of our students if most of their teachers themselves do not know or speak English, nor are trained to teach it as a second language. Nothing beyond the sole inadequate English textbook is provided, and that too for the most part is taught in the regional language. This is an enormous problem to be tackled, and one that cannot be wished away. We need to take a fresh look at the recruitment and training of English teachers in our regional medium schools. Much more needs to be done to improve the teaching of English in our government regional medium schools. This

should be one of the main priorities of a larger policy to disseminate and democratise the use of English in India. Lack of action can only reinforce the economic and social divide between the haves, who know English, and the have-nots who don't. The opportunities for economic advancement for the latter will be even more limited in the future.

Mother tongue education is facing a grave threat to its very survival. The urban middle class, and more and more of the ambitious poor, have deserted our regional medium municipal corporation schools for private English medium schools. A similar process of educational segregation is becoming visible in rural India. These unhealthy developments will continue, unless our mainstream government schools significantly improve the teaching and learning of all subjects, and English in particular. What would be counterproductive, as some states have done, is to begin teaching English earlier at the primary rather than the middle school stage.

We need to learn from countries like China and Japan that we can support mother tongue education, and also promote English vigorously in our schools. Any initiative to improve English in our government regional medium schools would be welcomed by most sections of Indian society. It would receive overwhelming support from slumdweller, rural agricultural labourers and tribals who send their children to these our mainstream schools.

(The writer is the Director of the Centre For Learning Resources, Pune, and can be contacted at clr@vsnl.com)