

**First generation English language learners in post-Covid rural India:
Situation and Aspirations**



Abstract

Young learners from all over the world today are facing indescribable problems to continue with their basic formal learning due to Covid Lockdown and the closure of schools for more than a year. The rural Indian scenario is more than horrible. Government schools are the only source and hope of learning language properly in rural India. Learning English along with any of the vernacular languages properly boosts both the confidence and acceptability in the job sector. Good communication in English is a necessary criterion in a cosmopolitan society. But English is not taught as a language but as a subject in most of the government schools. English language teachers are not properly trained to teach English language as a medium of communication. After completing class 12 exams, only a few students can confidently communicate in English. Sadly, even after passing colleges, the percentage of English speakers and communicators is barely hopeful. And it is not a post-Covid scenario but pre-Covid one. The present paper tries to realize the situations of the first generation Young English learners in rural government schools; the challenges that they face during learning this so called foreign but otherwise the official language of India, the probable solutions to ease out the situations in the post-Covid scenario and how rural India can emerge as an outstanding human resource that can interact in English language fluently and grow using the tools of mobile telecommunication and information technology if the government schools are properly backed and supported digitally after the possible implementation of NEP-2020 and Post-Covid restructuring of education system.

Keywords

English language; Language Teaching; Indian Education; School Education; Government schools; NEP-2020; Rural Schools; Education policy; TEFL; TESOL; ESL; ELT

Introduction

Learning English as a second language and communicating in English proficiently is one of the most desirable quality in today's job sector, both public and private, in India and the world. Even a Uber Eat or Foodpanda or a Zomato delivery boy in a cosmopolitan city like Tokyo or Dhaka or Kolkata or Bengaluru might not be hired if he cannot speak and read in English or understand the language properly. It has become an acceptable fact, that today English has become the main language of our global village. Most of the Nobel laureates in literature might not be acclaimed had their works not been translated into English. English today is the language of power, recognition, growth, higher learning, literature, promotion and the favourite language of the employers around the earth. But most of the government school students in India are not benefitted with the use of this language in real life situations. Yes, they can bring sufficient marks to pass the English exams in the school grade, sometimes the marks are more than sufficient. Even they know a lot of grammar formulas or write some of the memorised compositions if asked. But after passing high schools and colleges or in the later age also, only if speaking in English is mandatory to get a job, most of them take a round or two of the Spoken-English classes offered by coaching centres in the cities and towns. The rest of them bemoan at their dying age that if they could talk in English well, they would surely have a better career option, or at least two or three more promotions. And those who interact in English amid a crowd are either glanced at with disapproval or regarded with having relentless superiority over others. It is usually regarded as spoken language of aristocrats. It is strange to observe if English language in India really deserves such hegemonic status as it was introduced in the school education system here in the subcontinent more than 150 years ago, after the year 1835!

English Language in Indian Education System:

To learn and use a language fluently in day to day's work other than the mother tongue, it is the best way to learn it in the younger days, preferably in the primary stage of education and then advancing it in the middle school, as 11 to 13 years are a very crucial for second language acquisition and language development for a child.

In one's 8 years a child develops complex language skills. The concrete operational stage in which a child starts to think logically and in an organized way also pave the path to learn more than one language simultaneously. In the National policy of Education-1968, NPE-1986 and again in NPE-2020, the learning of English language with other regional languages has been given equal importance. The policy makers obviously know that in a multilingual country like India the importance of learning English is unquestionable. Harold F. Schiffman, an expert on Dravidian culture, has commented "I would argue that the three language formula is in fact consonant with the traditional multilingualism and linguistic diversity of the subcontinent. It fits the linguistic culture of the area, and it rejects the monism of policy planners who have tried to impose imported policies of the Soviet or other types". According to him, there is a tendency "for English to take over as the instrumental language" in India, as there is a lack of a symbolic national language in India which once Sanskrit used to take.

But the introduction of English as a second language is not a post-independence education policy. In fact, English language in the school education in India was introduced long ago in the year 1835, during the British rule, at the time of the then governor general of India, Lord William Bentinck. The English Education Act-1835 introduced the necessary allocation of funds to spend on English language based education in India. Though Thomas Babington Macaulay will remain ever infamous to the Indians for his recommendations and biased observation of Indian culture and heritage in his famous memorandum that actually was a boon in disguise as it was he who opined "it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars". The vast amount of money that had been draining towards a single direction from India to the English land; however small in proportion; found a new direction of coming back to teach Indians the language that would make Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Sri Aurobindo and millions of other souls to answer back the imperialist British rule in their language. The English language had given the Indians the hope, scope and courage lit by Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Chittaranjan Dash and many such legal scholars to make use of the so called the most rational British law and legal system against the British evil tortures and oppressions in the name of the 'rule of law'.

The British had introduced English language in the schools, with the basics of English grammar, the rules of composing official letters, the introduction of European history and science in the syllabus because they needed sufficient English educated people to run their system. It was directly related to their imperial interest. On one hand it would serve their economic interest of hiring Indians instead of British officials, on the other hand it would serve as a common language of the rulers against the thousand vernacular languages and dialects in a multilingual and multicultural land like India. There was another purpose too; the British education policy tried to infuse inferiority complex among the vernacular speaking Indians by creating an aura of hegemony revolving round the English language that represented British rule, their culture, lifestyle, belief systems etc. They did not need fluent English speaking Indians but Indians who could understand British instructions and follow them with ease. Their intention was to rule the country with the English speaking native Indians who would be ashamed of their Indian birth and would be gratified thinking themselves as 'quasi-sahibs'.

But after independence, the needed change in the education system was not followed, at least for the English language. Though the CBSE was formed in the year 1929 as a governmental board of education, in most of the state's School Education is a state-affair and education boards in the respective states take care of the syllabus and the learning in the schools. With subjects like History, Biology and Mathematics in vernacular language, English is also retained like pre-independence time. It is included in the syllabus in the government schools but without any change of objective and without taking into consideration of the change it needed in the changed situation. In fact, in government schools today also it has been regarded as a subject and not a language in which mere pass marks is not adequate for learning. A few comprehension passages, some grammar questions, a few 'True-False' questions from a story or a poem and some personal letters or business letter writing contained the whole syllabus of the English 'subject'. Grace marks have also been issued in some states in state board examinations with subjects like English and Mathematics because most of the students fail in these two subjects and mass failure in the board exams could have a negative effect on the government's popularity.

Language Learning

For the first generation English learners SLA or second language acquisition must be in a very scientific process. As English language has its origin and development in a very different social and cultural background, the language learning process also must be very different than teaching other Indian languages. Usually language learning consists of four parts, listening; speaking; Reading and Writing. They are interrelated to one another. Listening provides scope for unconscious input of the language to be saved in the subconscious mind and reading provides conscious input. On the other hand fluent speaking is generated by unconscious output and writing, the conscious output. According to the famous linguist Stephen D. Krashen , there are five main stages of learning a second language in the classroom; they are Pre-Production , Early Production, Speech emergence, Intermediate fluency, and Advance fluency .“The primary factor driving SLA appears to be the language input that learners receive. Learners become more advanced the longer they are immersed in the language they are learning and the more time they spend voluntarily reading. The input hypothesis developed by linguist Stephen Krashen theorizes that comprehensible input alone is necessary for second language acquisition. Krashen makes a distinction between language acquisition and language learning (the acquisition–learning distinction), claiming that acquisition is a subconscious process, whereas learning is a conscious one. According to this hypothesis, the acquisition process in L2 (Language 2) is the same as L1 (Language 1) acquisition. Learning, on the other hand, refers to conscious learning and analysis of the language being learned. Krashen argues that consciously learned language rules play a limited role in language use, serving as a monitor that could check second language output for form — assuming the learner has time, sufficient knowledge, and inclination (the monitor hypothesis)” (wikipedia.org).

The Indian Situation

Listening and speaking plays a very significant role in language acquisition but in school education system and the syllabus in the government schools in India ,there is hardly any scope for these two. Like other subjects, language learning is also not learner centric but teacher centric. Even in the English classroom, teachers are not used to talk in English but in vernacular languages. Students are not encouraged to talk in English and there is no scope of talking and active listening in the classroom other than when the teacher reads a story or a poem in the syllabus. There is no scope of using multimedia and advanced technology in a

government schools with limited infrastructure available.

Moreover, the syllabus is not optimum to make a student acquire the language hardly spoken outside the school boundary. In a 40 or 45 minutes English class; which might also be taken on the alternative days, and when the emphasis is given not on speaking and reading but on bringing at least 20 percent marks in the subject; is English really regarded as a language in the middle school education in the government schools? The question is very pertinent today.

But there is more grim fact than this, most of the language teachers are not proficient and competent enough to teach English as a language and this is because they are the product of the same system in which they are teaching now. Surely, some of them have achieved record marks in English subject but most of them are yet unable to speak English language properly and to communicate in the language fluently, let alone their ability to teach the language.

Even after getting government jobs as a language teacher, there is hardly any training or orientation available for the school teachers regarding the teaching technique and teaching process of English language. Teaching English as a second language requires special techniques, trainings, worksheets, practice-manuals etc. Both the knowledge of education and psychology is needed for this. Wonderful researches are being done all over the world regarding English language training. But government schools and the language teachers are light-years away from the global scenario of Teaching English as a Foreign language (TEFL) or English as Second language Training (ESL/ELT) Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) system.

The problem in Teaching and in Learning method:

The emphasizing on memorising is one of the horrible drawback of learning English language. The communicational aspect of the language thus is lost in real life application. Moreover project work and other active involvement of the learner is not optimum in the government school syllabi. In a cosmopolitan city, one can find various chances to interact in English with other people of a multicultural society but in rural areas, the scope is none. The school and the teachers are the only hope of a first generation young learner to practice and acquire the language. But as there is problems in the method of teaching the language, the

young learners though start with an enthusiastic approach but find it very difficult to learn the language and soon get disinterested concluding that learning English is one of the most difficult task on the earth to continue. The only option left for them is to bring the pass marks in English by hook or by crook. The writer has seen in his 13 years of teaching career spanning from a degree college to a primary school and then to a junior high school that geniuses in Mathematics and Sciences subjects abhor English like ghost, that someone who scored 92% in English in 12+ exam even cannot write a few sentences on his own and even a Master of English cannot express her own ideas in the language she had dissected for more than 15 years. And it is not an individual fact but a general picture of the society that needs no reference to prove. It is not the student, but the teachers and the system of learning must be held responsible for this situation. The whole education system must be ashamed of such wastage of time, money and energy where a student cannot express oneself in the language one has been learning for 17 years.

Mr. John Sekar Jeyaraj of The American college, Madurai, in his paper titled “Challenges of teaching English in India” has suggested on Continuous Professional development (CPD) for the teachers commenting that “Teachers need to update themselves in accordance with learners needs and explosion of the knowledge in the subject. They are no longer viewed as sages from whom knowledge flows in a hierarchical manner... Teachers are ‘born’ and ‘reborn’ in every class and they need to know more than learners”. He has pointed out some real issues regarding this also. But, foremost the language teachers must need to realize that their responsibilities do not end with completing the syllabus or teaching tips on how to pass in English exam to the weakest guy in the class. A teacher to teach the English language, plays the role of a second mother to the language learner. The whole professional future and the success of the student depend on his successful acquisition and understanding of the language. Until the age old system of education changes, hopefully in a few years; the English language teachers must be providing regular oil to the lighthouse, by self educating themselves with language teaching techniques learnt from wherever they may ;both to keep themselves warm and up to date with the global scenario of language teaching and to scatter light of knowledge to those misguided young ships in the dire dark wintry ocean called Indian school education system.

The post-Covid language classroom, the challenges

In a recent study published by the Azim Premji Foundation, in February-2021, done on 16067 children over 1137 public schools in 5 states revealed among other facts, that 92% children on an average from class II (age 6 to 7) to class VI(age 10 to 12) have lost one specific language ability from the previous year. The language assessments were done on oral expression, reading fluency, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing skills for different classes.

Again, According to an Oxfam India report published in 'the quint.com', in September-2020, "over 80 percent children enrolled in government schools did not receive any form of education since the lockdown period". It further says "what's even more shocking is that around 80 percent teachers in these five states had received no orientation training for conducting online classes". There is no need to find solace that it has been the situation in those five states only but in almost all of the states except a few, the situation has remained the same. Whereas during the same time a few states have organized many religious festivals and state legislative elections after providing trainings to thousands of government officials.

"Many government and non government surveys had been done in India to understand how the young people are learning. Most of the surveys showed the 'precarious state of learning crisis' in rural areas primarily. We have to keep in mind that more than 65 percent of Indian population live in rural areas. The greatest and the latest survey across the country the National Achievement Survey (NAS) undertaken by NCERT supported by the Union ministry of education conducted in the year 2017 (4) shows that 10 crore or more students in the next few years will suffer from learning losses unless proper action is not taken. The survey was done upto class VIII, which is the most critical grade in India regarding school dropouts. The post-covid situation can be easily imaginable from this. Formal illiteracy will be gigantic and in innumerable numbers. Even before the implementation of NEP 2020, crores of students will have to leave the educational arena because of poverty and family responsibilities." (Das; Searching Identity of Indian Education: Problems, Hopes and Scopes in Post Covid India).

It is easily comprehensible from the study that what amount of learning loss we are talking about. It is also comprehensible that among these losses, how much English language learning has been affected as most of the public school students are definitely first generation English language learners in our country.

The ages between 6 to 12 are the particular age when language acquisition and language learning can be done with optimum potential if properly trained. Covid closure of schools left tens of millions of students suffer from learning loss yet to be meet up in the next how many years, only is known by providence!

As India's primary education has been regarded as not so important issue by and far by the respected and sophisticated policy makers ,COVID closure is definitely not the only evil butthere is also eons of indifference and neglect. According to prof. Amartya Sen "The central role of education also highlights the far reaching effects of the remarkable contrast between India's neglect of school education and the massive expansion of higher education that has already occurred and continues today. This is both deeply inefficient and amazingly unjust.India's remarkable neglect of basic education has a decisive role in this handicap."

The generation of young learners suffered from this language loss will unfortunately carry the loss in their upper grades of education years after years if any sustainable development programme is not formed by the Indian school education system as a Post-COVID education policy in the recent future.

What can we Aspire

NEP-2020 has ushered lot of hopes in the future education scenario in India. For the post-COVID Indian school education, NEP-2020 might bring disrupting changes to the static education system if properly monitored and implemented . Peer Tutoring as proposed in the NEP-2020 can be a very effective measure to meet up the language loss. The proposal says "Due to the scale of the current learning crisis, all viable methods will be explored to support teachers in the mission of attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy. Studies around the world show one-on-one peer tutoring to be extremely effective for learning not just for the learner, but also for the tutor. Thus, peer tutoring can be taken up as a voluntary and joyful activity for fellow students under the supervision of trained teachers and by taking due care of safety aspects. Additionally, it will also be made far easier for trained volunteers - from both the local community and beyond - to participate in this large-scale mission. Every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly.

States may consider establishing innovative models to foster such peer-tutoring and volunteer activities, as well as launch other programmes to support learners, in this

nationwide mission to promote foundational literacy and numeracy.”(NEP-2020: 2.7) This initiative can be extremely helpful in rural areas due to cultural, social and economical uniformity in the villages.

There is also mention of multiple pathways like “involving both formal and non-formal education modes.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes offered by the National Institute of Open Schooling

(NIOS) and State Open Schools will be expanded and strengthened for meeting the learning needs of young people in India who are not able to attend a physical school. NIOS and State Open Schools will offer the

following programmes in addition to the present programmes: A, B and C levels that are equivalent to

Grades 3, 5, and 8 of the formal school system; secondary education programmes that are equivalent to

Grades 10 and 12; vocational education courses/programmes; and adult literacy and life- enrichment

programmes. States will be encouraged to develop these offerings in regional languages by establishing

new/strengthening existing State Institutes of Open Schooling (SIOS).(NEP-2020: 3.5). It might be highly

effective to regain the language loss hence suffered by the learners who unfortunately had lost trust of

school education system either due to acute poverty or due to the lack of time being involved in other trades.

The proposal of blended classrooms along with digitization of the education where “ ICT- based educational initiatives must be optimized and expanded to meet the current and future challenges in providing quality

education for all.”(NEP-2020:24.1) may take significant amount of time because of the disparity of urban and

rural classroom. Easier initiatives for the time being like ‘Flipped class’ can be an effective way to teach

second language as a majority of the learners can have access of internet and digital devices through the

elders at home today even in rural areas.

DTH services that are readily available in the remotest part of the country can be utilized for English

language education and language training. Recently Private services like ‘Tata Sky’ has introduced English

learning classes as a value added service. Government may direct all the service providers through TRAI

guideline to make language teaching a mandatory channel to provide free to the users.

Teachers' education and training to meet up the new challenges the COVID closure had thrown like online exams and online activities and projects has also been proposed in the policy (24.3 and 24.4) but language training for teachers must have a special place among these trainings; which should be ensured as soon as possible. There are numerous online platforms like 'Udemy' or 'BBC online' from where a teacher can easily be trained without any interference by the present government infrastructure for Teachers' training. The education department must a valid advance level certificate to declare the teacher apparently 'fit' for the English language classroom.

Conclusion

By concentrating on the problem of Indian education, Swami Vivekananda in the essay "The Education that India Needs", had clearly stated that "The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land, by dint of pride and royal authority, among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it in the same way, i.e. by spreading education among the masses". In English language teaching and syllabus, the same concern is applicable to build a viable and sustainable rural English speaking community. Localized syllabus, personalized worksheets and test methods with local references must be taken into consideration. The hitherto neglected rural India and more neglected elementary and primary education of the government and government aided schools deserved much more attention, without any doubt. NEP-2020 has ushered new hopes, still it is a distressing fact that India's policy implementation record has been more or less dismal in most of the previous cases. The problem of red-tapeism and disrupting oppositions who oppose only for the sake of opposing is true to every political parties." (Das). Let us pray to the almighty that the post-COVID opening of schools might attract that needed attention and necessary infrastructure and syllabus development with the implementation of the NPE-2020. India has been, for ages, a magical land, a wonderful blending of the opposites, where cultures, societies and festivals find a common name as "Indian". The government schools can also be found celebrating that unity of thought and objective amid the diversity of localised syllabi to integrate a sustainable English language education programme for the present and the future generation learners.

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