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English Studies in India: A Need for Decolonization

Mr. Shashi Kant Acharya

Researcher, Department of English, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India.

Abstract

The present paper explores the subjugation of Indian culture by English in India. It interrogates how British Council plays a very important role in colonizing the culture of the country. The teaching of English language is deficient because there is a lack in communicative approach to language in third world countries. Eurocentrism has become a disease of the mind of a colonized country; it cannot think beyond its norms and beliefs. This paper tries to solve the problem of cultural colonization of English Language.

Keywords

Subjugation; British Council; English Language; Eurocentrism; Decolonize.



The British Council's Indian policy was part of a larger colonial policy dictated by the British government's colonial office, which took over all the Council's activities in the colonies from the foreign office as not only a possible

instrument, but perhaps the only possible instrument in multi-racial communities.

A careful study of the history of the English language in India ever since Macaulay's infamous minute of 1835 makes it clear that English was deemed by the British rulers as forceful vehicle of domination and not merely a medium of communication. There seems to be a general belief that "language is a component of culture" (Loveday 57). It is held axiomatic to say that second or foreign language learning is a means of acquiring cross cultural consciousness. The axiom is a clever ruse to smuggle literature in language learning. The spuriousness of the proposition is artfully concealed by the advancing seemingly innocent arguments:

In most cases, learning and L2 represents learning new shorthand for cultural knowledge. This is because, as we have seen above, language reflects and integrates into itself features of the physical and ideational world in which it operates. With time both the external 'reality' and the language interpenetrate each other to such an extent that it becomes difficult "to make a complete divorce between objective reality and our linguistic symbols of reference to it". (Sapir 49)

Here it will not be out of place to mention how the colonial hauteur based on master-slave relationship ruined the teaching of English in India. The first pedagogical catastrophe occurred in the sixties when in the name of 'Structural Approach' traditional teaching of English was destroyed almost overnight, by the courtesy of the British Council. The next major disaster came in the form of an avalanche of Communicative Language Teaching brazenly under the banner of the British council. There are lots of short comings in the communicative approach. The initial impulse that gave rise to the approach was best summed up by Widdowson in 1972:

As a statement of fact or of existential reality the above observations are unexceptionable. What is wrong is the assumption that the sorry state of affairs is caused by a single factor, viz. absence of the communicative approach to learning behind it is the implicit understanding that all that was needed to remedy the situation was the introduction or adoption of the communicative approach. Such an understanding is either naive and simplistic or calculated and motivated.

One liberal explanation of the naiveté could be ignorance of the advocates of the communicative approach of the social, economic and educational conditions in the underdeveloped and developing countries of Asia and Africa, in which case what they are saying and doing can be excused to some extent. For, most of these people are given to a sort of 'Eurocentrism' according to which their vision is confined to a somewhat homogeneous cultural background which dictates as much their understanding of the needs of the learners and the solutions they deem proper to fulfill those needs. A situation where an average class is sixty to eighty strong, where an overwhelming majority of learners are from the economically and culturally weaker or disadvantaged sections of society, where there is little or no motivation to learn foreign language, where the linguistic and communicative competence of the average teacher is extremely poor, where library facilities are hopelessly inadequate and where a moribund examination system controls and governs all teaching and learning- a situation of the above description is simply inconceivable for these high-brow theorists. For many native speakers of English Asia and Africa still continue to be academic colonies to be civilized by self-professed

‘experts’ peddling their expensive wares in the third world countries. (59)

The communicative approach gained disproportionate publicity through a calculated exercise in salesmanship carried out in Bangalore, India, under the name of Communicational Teaching Project (C.T.P.). The project started in 1979 under the directorship of Dr. N.S. Prabhu, an official of the British Council in Madras. From the way the project and its alleged innovativeness and effectiveness were advertised in articles and books and at seminars and workshops it appeared that it had become the sheet anchor of the advocates of the communicative approach. No attempt had been made to make a truly objective and dependable evaluative study of the expensive project. The prestige of the British Council and of some of the better-known EFL activists and writers like C.J. Brumfit was staked as a back-up manoeuvre to lend the CTP the status of a peace-setter in the field of communicative teaching of English. But the well-orchestrated euphoria about the CTP notwithstanding, the best that could be established about it was the following conclusion arrived at by Allan Beretta and Alan Davies in their ‘Evaluation of the Bangalore Project’ published in April 1985 issue of the ELT journal. Part of the conclusion reads as follows:

From the beginning, it was our view that the results of the evaluation might constitute a ‘probe’ of the central CTP hypotheses, but not ‘proof’. The impossibility of full experimental control, and the potential of bias in test that no group of learners has been exposed to the CTP treatment for more than three years precludes any firm statement about the effectiveness of this method at later stages of learning...

If all the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ are taken together and read in the light of the inherent limitations of any reliable evaluation as pointed out in the extract quoted above, all that remains of the CTP is mere whimper, quite disproportionate to

the noises made about its success in international conferences and journals. One aspect deserving our serious attention, and arising out of the CTP, is the insidious practice of having 'client experts' in developing countries to mouth propaganda on behalf of the professional overseas masters. The practice is undoubtedly a double blessing. It furthers the interests of the masters by giving them extensive markets for selling their wares and it also brings untold patronage and rich rewards to the client spokesmen.

The whole question boils down to the attitude one has towards non-native Englishes which have acquired the status of institutionalized varieties of English. Way back in 1984 in one of his essays, Braj Kachru argued that there exists or should exist a distinction between a speech community and a speech fellowship, the latter term having originally been used by Firth. Kachru states:

I believe that the term speech fellowship brings us closer to the real world of English users, their underlying distinct differences, and also their shared characteristics. One might find that the genesis of each such speech fellowship in English is unique, or there may be topologies of general patterns of development. In the last fifty years such varieties of English have become...so widespread in a community and of such long standing that they may be thought stable and adequate enough to be institutionalized and regarded as varieties of English in their own right rather than stages on the way to a more native-like English. (76)

And Kachru goes on to say:

What we see here, then, is what the non-native English-using speech fellowships are using, Englishes of the world in their divergent situations and contexts and with various linguistic and ethnic attitudes. (77)

Once it is conceded that English is a language of international communication, a natural corollary follows: the concept 'English' will have to undergo a radical

modification to give place to other, 'Englishes', which would obviously include local forms of English, belonging not only to speech communities but also to speech fellowships as mentioned by Kachru. It will have to be recognized that the goal of English as an international language should never be acculturation but getting precisely the sense of personal and cultural identity. This would necessitate accommodation and convergence of speech styles and socio-cultural norms in a spirit of mutuality of obligation and symmetrical reciprocity on the part of the interlocutors of whom one might be native and another foreign. In plain speech, good manners raise tolerance to respect.

In whatever way one looks at the problem, the inescapable conclusion is that pluralism, mutual respect and tolerance and obligatory reciprocity are the basic premises on which the concept 'World English' is to be understood.

It is also clear that since acculturation can neither be a practical nor a desirable aim in regard to the lingua-franca use of English, the aim must be redefined as accommodation and convergence. With this modified aim certain inevitable pedagogical implications follow. To quote Jugen Beneke:

The second step is rigorous scanning of existing teaching materials as to the ethnocentricity in content and linguistic features. For those professionally concerned with the teaching of English as a second language among the questions to be asked are: Does the material invite the learner's identification? Does it show consideration of the use of the language by non-natives or does not expect them to take over roles alien to them? Are the paralinguistic aspects of the materials culturally neutral or culture specific? (79)

Since communicative competence is not possible and 'mere' linguistic competence is not sufficient, it should be intercultural competence that is envisaged. This can be prepared by cognitive insight into the problems of English as international language.

Two facts emerge about the role of English. First, the overwhelming majority is prepared to accept as an accomplished fact the dominance of English as the international lingua franca in a European and worldwide context. English has become so important that it would be no exaggeration to say that having a command on English is almost equivalent to developing a second stage in literacy, a culture technique as indispensable as reading and writing.

But must the user of English for international communication observe also the cultural norms of the native-speaker, becoming a “cultural monster” in the process? Though we have much to learn about its ethnology, considerable progress has already been made towards the evolution of a new ‘communication dialect’. Among the users of English in international contexts there is a widespread readiness to tolerate a non-authentic ‘international’ variety, which is clearly seen not as an inter-language, a stage on the road to perfection, but a tool for communication in its own right, a final state.

This communication dialect of English will have to be continuously re-authenticated by a steady inflow of authentic language. In some parts of the world (e.g. West Africa) creative writers have achieved remarkable results in making English serviceable to a wide range of communicative needs of their societies. But then their cultural and linguistic situation is different from that of Western Europe. In the symbolical speech community of West Africa Writers in English could be said to be the African elite and English is indispensable for the ‘new nations’ not only for business and administration, but also to develop a sense of national identity beyond ethnic group.

The foreign-language user (of English), on the other hand, has to find a new answer to the question of the speech community that arises each time a constellation that uses English as an international language comes into being. With English as an international language, the primary group of reference will in most cases (true bilingualism being the rare exception) be the Speech

Community of the speakers' own language, i.e., the Frenchman will not cease to be Frenchman, etc. each time, however, 'English as an international language' is used, it (or rather its user) creates a secondary ad hoc speech community that exists only as long as the respective constellation lasts. Thus, it is no longer acculturation that is required by the foreign user, but accommodation and convergence of speech styles and socio-cultural norms. Decolonizing English teaching in India is vital not merely as an academic need, it is also vital requirement for national integrity and self-esteem.

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