

The Dynamics in Democratization of English Language Education in Tamil Nadu

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Key Words: Democratization, State action, English language education, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

This paper investigates the factors influencing the democratization of English education in Tamil Nadu. A historical analysis of access to English education shows that it is dependent on State action, political prioritization and applicability. The dynamics among the variables and their influence on English language education has been examined in this paper. Though access to English education has increased in the contemporary globalized context, the quality of education varies. The opinions of the teachers, students and community members have been analysed to understand their views on the quality of English education. This paper suggests areas for improvement for the democratization of English education.

Introduction

English is crucial for Social mobility and economic development (Sharma 2020), and gender equality (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian 2008). Though the power acquired by English buttressed the administration and education system in India, it also created social divisions between the urban and the rural population, in addition to gender inequality and disparity between the English educated and "English-less" people in the country (Bhatt, 2010; Aula, 2014). It is because of these disparities that the democratization of English language education has become imperative.

Democratization of English Education

Democratization of the education system is a powerful tool to combat discrimination, and remove inequalities in access to English education. According to the United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, democratization is a process that leads to an open participatory society (Boutros-Ghali, 1996). English language education has become more accessible with Tamil Nadu introducing the English medium section in Government schools in 2013. The enrolment in Class VI in English medium Government school has gone up. The enrolment rates in the districts of Madurai, Melur and Usilampatti has gone up from 1674 students in 2013 to 1870 students in 2014. (The Hindu, Sept 3, 2013(<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/enrolment-in-madurai-governmentschools-on-the-rise/article6375434.ece>). Nevertheless, it is posing learning challenges to many students, particularly in the rural regions.

In this article three factors—the actors and the state action, the political process and prioritization, and outcomes in applicability—have been analysed to show how they influence the growth of English education during colonialism, after independence and in the contemporary globalized world. The opinions of the stakeholders for improving the quality of English education have also been discussed, along with interventions to strengthen its quality.

Actors, Processes and Outcomes in the Growth of English Language

Significant policy changes have motivated compartmentalizing English education in India into three periods, the colonial period, the Independent India period and the contemporary period of globalization. In these three periods, the growth of the English language was influenced by three factors:

- i. State action: State action comprises the efforts of the actors and the governing apparatuses in influencing English education. It includes the infrastructure built by the State to promote the learning of English.
- ii. Political discourses: Political discourse denotes the narratives and counter-narratives on the role of English and its impact.
- iii. Applicability: Applicability refers to the different ways in which the language can be applied in various fields; the employment opportunities it opens up as a part of the outcome of English education.

English Language in the Colonial Period

The British could not understand the local languages (Evans, 2002). So, they set up English schools like the St. George Anglo-Indian Higher Secondary School (Chennai, 1715), Bishop Heber Higher Secondary School (Tiruchirappalli, 1762) and St. Johns Vestry Anglo Indian School (Tiruchirappalli, 1763). All these English schools continue to have their roots in the oldest English language teaching institutions outside England (Muthia 2014). This initiative produced a community of English-speaking Indians (Mukherjee, 2010). State support for English education continued until Independence with infrastructure developed from primary school to universities. However, access to English education was available only to the elites (Naregal, 2002). Consequently, the political discourses around English seldom reached the masses. The applicability of the English language opened jobs in teaching, administration and bureaucracy so that the English-educated elites could act as mediators between the State and society.

English Language in Independent India

In Independent India, the maxims of linguistic pluralism and unity in diversity became a value of the Indian democracy (Bashir, 2006). As linguistic diversity was connected to cultural and linguistic identities, it facilitated the formation of the states based on language. Tamil Nadu has always given an exalted place to Tamil as the oldest language in the world (Shulman, 2016). After the formation of Tamil Nadu in 1956, Tamil was prioritized by all the governments (Hardgrave, 1973).

In other words, compared to the British era, In independent India the State support shifted to Tamil from English. This however did not mean that the State opposed the English language; it simply took a neutral stance towards English. On 26 January 1950, the new Constitution, in the name of national unity, declared Hindi as the official language of India, with English continuing as an associate official language for fifteen years, after which Hindi would become the sole official language. However, counter-narratives challenged this discourse based on the view that historically and culturally, Tamil was more significant for the people of Tamil Nadu than Hindi. This was a turning point in the history of the English language in Tamil Nadu. The English language was incorporated into the political discourse to counter the national unity argument. In the 1960s, the Dravidian political parties led the opposition to Hindi by linking it to Tamil linguistic identity. This politicization gave the party an edge over other national parties (Chandran, 2011), which in turn led to the re-prioritization of the English language across Tamil Nadu. Consequently, the State's actions in support of English as a medium of instruction in educational institutions also intensified. This prioritization helped to dismantle the elitist status of English.

English Language in the Contemporary Period of Globalization

Now, English continues to enjoy its role as a medium of communication with active State support. The English language has vertically deepened and horizontally widened its application in the contemporary period. It is accessible to a large section of the population due to the

State's actions and political prioritization. From 98 English medium schools in 2008 to nearly 950 schools of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), (Sundaram, 2019) shows the growth and acceptance of English medium education. However, while the enrolment in English medium schools is increasing, the quality of English education is questionable; hindering the democratization of English education.

Issues to be Addressed for Democratization of English Education

Interviews were conducted with teachers, students, principal, educational administrators, and community members to know their views on the quality of English education. Some of the concerns raised by the participants have been briefly discussed as follows:

- a) *Issues related to how Tamil is perceived:* There are two types of issues that have to be dealt with to bring about a change in the quality of English education. The first issue relates to the positioning of Tamil as a Classical language leading to its politicization; The second is the perception that English is learnt for routine communication in everyday life.

The State, to reinforce its legitimacy and acceptance among the masses, has politicized Tamil. The politicization has created a perception that the knowledge of Tamil alone is enough to secure the future of children. The mother of a child from the rural district of Theni says, "*Tamizhnattilvaazhvathukkthamizhm attrumeengalkkupothum*" (We need only Tamil to live in Tamil Nadu). This attitude promotes Tamil

monolingualism and hinders the spread of English education despite the state policies. The perception can be overcome by conducting awareness programmes on the importance of English with the assurance that English education does not mean loss of Tamil identity. The value of English is further diminished when the purpose of English learning is limited to communication. In the words of a 22-year old postgraduate student participant:

English I feel is just a medium of communicative [sic] language, more than that I won't give any preference to English [sic] so it's just a medium of communication. This is because I am possessive about my language that is Tamil [sic]. If we know English up to some level that we can speak so that others can understand [sic], that's enough!

Such perceptions can be tackled by emphasizing by creating opportunities for the learners to use English in challenging contexts. This will show the need to think in English.

- b) *Skill related challenges:* The quality of English education also suffers because the communication skills and comprehension levels of students and teachers are inadequate. Building student's English speaking skills develops their confidence and helps learning. A 28-year old woman participant shared:

I am not good in English. Even now I am not so good in English [sic] . . . I doubt myself at times whether I talk good English [sic] . . . that is why I struggle a lot while speaking. I was in State Board [sic]. I had no confidence in talking English and I will be [sic] so hesitant because I don't know whether

I will be in a good grammar or something [sic]. I don't have any fluency in that.

A first-year college student recollecting his experience in an English medium government school has this to say about his teacher:

In my school, though teachers talk in English, they don't know how to teach When I was at school, I felt that I should have got a better teacher to teach English They said they had a rule to talk only in English but they did not practice [it]. They didn't make use correct English whenever we talk a wrong word or sentence [sic]. They laugh at us, but they don't correct us, which creates an inferiority complex among the students that our English is not good. So, we should not talk.

The State must provide financial assistance to build quality infrastructure for English language education. Spoken English should become the core of teacher training and teaching in schools. This will help build their confidence in teachers and students.

- c) *Teaching related Issues:* The teachers barely teach in English despite their academic qualifications. A 30-old lecturer participant describing his experience said:

Even teachers used to talk to us in Tamil only and we also talk to them in Tamil. There was no push [sic] to talk in English. When I went to 11th and 12th, i.e. during my matriculation in that school, they were compelling us to talk in English, if we don't, they will fine us [sic]. They use teaching methods that are outdated and rote learning is still followed in English classes.

The Head of the English Department in

a college in Chennai added:

As a teacher of English for several decades, I feel that the teaching methods are kind of outdated. There is no timely revision in teaching methods to incorporate innovative learning that are practised in many other countries. I also feel that there is a shortage of financial support from the government. Due to this, it is not easy to implement new teaching-learning methodology in the real classroom settings.

To address these issues, the curriculum should be redesigned to promote active learning methodologies. Proper teacher training by competent educators has to be prioritized. With consistent support from the state technology, intervention can be facilitated to yield better learning outcomes in English.

The lack of access to English education affects a large section of women in our country leading to their exclusion from many fields. Girls often do not access tertiary levels of education. In Tamil Nadu, in 2012, at the Undergraduate level, 45670 more males were enrolled compared to females. At the postgraduate level too, the differences in enrolment rates continue with a difference of 14653 more males compared to females (Government of India, 2013; p. 134). We have to work on setting right the imbalances and improve the quality of English education to democratize it.

Conclusion

Knowledge of English is undeniably an instrument of progress that widens our horizons of interaction at all levels. The globalized period needs a more comprehensive and coherent approach with better coordination between the State action and outcomes. Redesigning

the curriculum to use learner-centred teaching methods, conducting teacher training programmes and appointing qualified English teachers will help to address the quality issues. Increasing

access and improving quality will go a long way to democratize English language education. This requires the joint effort of the state and society.

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