

English in Multilingual and Cross-cultural Context: Exploring Opportunities and Meeting the Challenges

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The proposed paper endeavours to analyse the role of English language in growing economies, like India, and transforming societies like Nepal. It also attempts to establish that English language has become the vehicle of transformation and an objective means to interpret the numerous cross-cultural contexts within the pluralistic societies. The paper proposes that if the linguistic pre-eminence of English, as a foreign language, is maintained it may affect numerous indigenous native languages/paroles and ultimately disturb the traditional fabric of the ancient cultures. The paper does not suggest that the English language should be dissuaded but it surely seeks to endorse the need to promote English as a more acceptable native language, expressing the hue and taste of the region, in any multilingual and cross-cultural context.

The English language has flourished and developed in multilingual and cross-cultural environments. It has become the indisputable world language, owing largely to its status as a link language in multilingual and pluralistic societies. The main reasons for the growth of English may be attributed to the rise and fall of the British Colonial rule, the imminent linguistic void in the immediate post colonial era that required a lingua franca to fill the hiatus and in the more recent times the role of English as the language of modernity, Science, technology, knowledge and development.

English became the language of transition and change ever since the American struggle for independence. It became the de facto language of the United States of America. But independent America, which was the amalgamation of various colonies, accommodated words from different languages within the colonies and the aboriginal communities to understand and describe their immediate reality. Most of the people who advocated English as the language of independent United States of America were native speakers from English speaking countries. When England and America became two independent countries using the same language adoption of new words gave the Americans a different identity. Queen's English was thus rendered insufficient to describe their concurrent reality. This gave rise to two variants of English i.e. British English and American English. Colonies, after independence, adopted either one of these language variants, as a constitutional language or a link language.

English, which was considered as the language of power during the imperial rule became the language of interpretation in independent colonies. The analogy between America and other colonies may seem far fetched in the 21st Century. But, the progress of America, over centuries, also owes to the fact that it produces knowledge in the accepted international language, English, whereas other colonies largely interpret knowledge through English and try to disseminate it appropriately in their local languages. As a result interpretation (not translation) has become an important activity that may also lead one to the different socio-political power structures in many of these countries. It clearly suggests that countries that have

adopted English as their first language seem to develop at a faster pace, for example, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and America. On the other hand countries that adopted English only as the language of governance created a social cleavage between those who knew English (government) and those who did not (the governed). The pull towards English as the language of governance and the attraction of adopting local language as the de facto language due to its affinity with culture creates a perplexity within the citizens of the respective countries who deliberately seek to acquire English for understanding the governance and power structures in their own countries. More and more people opt for English as the medium of instruction in schools and higher education. Local languages, with the passage of time, become insufficient to carry and deliver the load of Western information (dubbed as knowledge). Michel Foucault in "The Discourse on Language" maintains that:

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every education system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.

There is a third category of countries which includes our neighbours in Asia, namely, Japan and China, who have shown a miraculous rate of growth in spite of avoiding the lingua franca role of English, for a very long time. Indonesia is another curious example. The country, during the Japanese occupation showed miraculous progress through the adoption of one nation one language theory. Just as America, after independence, enriched its language by adopting new words and terminologies, Indonesia too included seven thousand new words and terminologies to its newly adopted national language. Under the Japanese occupation:

Indonesian became the sole language of education, administration, and the mass media. Prior to the Japanese occupation, all texts used at the high school and university level were in Dutch. These Dutch texts were promptly translated into Indonesian and new terminology was developed.... Indonesian suddenly began to grow at a tremendous pace... a forced growth, designed to enable it to exercise the functions of a mature modern language in the shortest possible time. The Language Office coined 7000 new terms during the period of Japanese occupation.

In Nepal, as is also the case with India, very little deliberate attempts have been made to inculcate and popularise new words and terminologies to enhance the de facto languages. Moreover the citizens of these countries have learnt to adapt to new terminologies through their acquaintance with English or modes of technology like television, computers, radio, and mobile phones. English has become an essential language in both these countries. It can be seen in the preference of English, over national language, as a medium of instruction in schools and higher education institutions. As a result English language is replacing the mother tongue, at least in the upper-middle-class and cosmopolitan areas in India. Even in Nepal there is a large population that migrates and in the process loses its language. That they acquire skills in other languages is not a point here because one may find new words to express new experiences but losing old word-associations also takes away the cultural affinity of

that expression. Acquired words do not represent the cultural experience of the speaker and do not penetrate into his/her psyche so as to allow private conversation even with the self. In that sense one not only gradually loses one's language but also one's culture. And if the adoption of a national language, like Nepali, or a de facto language like Hindi is mainly to retain the cultural integrity then the purpose is not served. Moreover, when language is overtly discouraged as the medium of instruction at schools and institutions of higher education it becomes an impediment to the child's psychological and intellectual growth. In societies, like India and Nepal, that are pluralistic and multilingual there should be provisions for simultaneous exposures to different languages so that individuals can develop languages required for public identity and at the same time nurture the language that defines them personally. It may seem difficult initially but if children are exposed to more than one language simultaneously they will acquire them easily. But when languages are differentiated on the basis of being considered as elite or inferior medium of instruction or communication, it creates a sense of inferiority in the native speakers and dissociation with the group that uses it. A sense of discrimination creeps in that encourages people to avoid their native language. Perry and Delpit's observation about African children holds ground even in similar situations encountered elsewhere:

. . . children's confidence is affected when they are made to feel ashamed of their home language and implicitly their parents and community.

Both India and Nepal, as also other countries where English has become the de facto link language, should differentiate between knowledge and language. Language should not be seen as a substitute to knowledge. It would be a great disservice to the indigenous ancient languages of these countries if contemporary knowledge cannot be translated into these languages. Similarly, it will be an equally great disservice to the world if the knowledge embedded in the ancient languages of these countries cannot be translated into English for the benefit of the world. For example Gautam Buddha, who was born in Nepal and whose views about life have transcended not only national but also continental boundaries became an inspiration in America¹ during the 1960s due to Herman Heese's novel *Siddharta*. Many people must have learnt about Buddhism through this novel. Buddhism is knowledge while German, the language in which the novel was initially written, and English in which it was later translated are only vehicles or mediums to carry this knowledge. The lucidity in the novel comes from the simplicity of the culture described and the precision of the thought depicted. Similarly, Ferdinand de Saussure's doctoral thesis on the genitive absolute in Sanskrit enabled the West to reconsider its monolithic philosophy and accept the multiplicity of meaning and consequently language and culture. Saussure is also considered as one of the founding fathers of semiotics. His concepts of sign/signifier/signified/referent were later adopted by literary thinkers such as Ronald Barthes, Lacan and Levi-Strauss and implemented in their respective areas of study. So Saussure's study of Sanskrit not only influences the study of Western linguistics it also became the basis for modern studies in literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis and anthropology. These examples are equally applicable to India and Nepal because both the countries exert an equal claim over Buddha and Sanskrit.

The best opportunity for India and Nepal lies in the cultivation of their cultural heritage through the plough of translation in the fertile field of English language. Both the countries need intellectuals who can translate indigenous

knowledge into English and the appropriate foreign knowledge into native languages. The Nepalese proverb which says green forests are Nepal's wealth can be used to promote indigenous practices of restoration and upkeep of environment in other parts of the world. Udaya Sharama, Chairman, (Resource Development Initiative Center) RDIC Kathmandu very appropriately points that:

. . . indigenous people value land and forest, they worship land and forest as it conveys a strong and intimate relationship that binds the indigenous people with the forest and land. They grow with the land and forest that is exclusively managed by indigenous groups without external help."

Just as Ireland has a close association with the sea and its literature conveys this cultural association even Nepal can create and translate its literature that prominently brings forth its association with hills valleys and mountains. International recognition of such writing, original or translated, is essential to promote Nepalese culture and literature. A well received book can bring more foreign tourists to a land than promotional bookings. "Once English acquires a new identity through creative writing, the language is liberated from its colonial past."² During the eighth decade of the twentieth century the novels of V S Naipal and Salman Rushdie created a new opening for the Indian literature in the West and now Indian writing in English is a booming business. Many writers like R K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and a host of others had created individual space for themselves in the Western literary world but commercial success due to an awareness and curiosity about the Indian culture and its writing grew at a phenomenal pace during the last decade of the twentieth century. The Indian writers writing during this period were the second or third generation Indian citizens who knew both the Indian culture and the English language like the back of their hand. The advantage India is reaping today owes a large deal to the fact that most Indians excel in the two prominent means of global communication i.e. English and computers. And both these means of global communication can be learnt at a faster pace if the younger generation is exposed to them in the mundane life situations. ATM kiosks, interactive screens in libraries, video games, mobile phones, television are some of the modern technologies that can increase both the technical and linguistic quotient of individuals.

Nepal being a land locked agrarian country with limited modern resources of electricity, industry and technology can use the communicative power of English to climb the Everest height of progress. It should not be forgotten that even the United Kingdom is an Island but the country established its power across continents by rowing across the sea. Nepal too can climb to reach its success going across the mountainous terrain, into the world that needs skilled manpower. Communication skill in English is a basic requirement but a competitive and creative bent of mind can best unlock the resources lying vacant in the outside world. Communication skills, to understand and entertain the foreign tourist, can help individuals sustain their livelihood but cannot bring large scale resources essential to the transforming nation. But if the English language becomes an essential language that can penetrate the individual feelings of people in the heartlands it will become a part of the culture and not remain an essential second language. Through English Language Teaching Nepal can aim to create cultural synergies. With so many variants of English in the advanced countries, Nepal and other transforming countries can equip their citizens with intercultural competence to work in a changing world. Language teaching should be substituted with language learning. And language learning has to be linked

with job opportunities and other economic activities. A teacher can only be a facilitator in the language learning activity. The state of Gujarat, in India, for instance has initiated various interactive programmes to facilitate language learning for students and other people. The Society for Creation of Opportunity through Proficiency in English (SCOPE) has been set up to build English language proficiency in youth and thereby provide employment opportunities to them. Classroom teaching/learning is not mandatory for the course. The government has also set up Digital Education and Learning Labs (DELL) in Under-Graduate colleges. The government has made provisions to telecast study aid through BISAG for those who cannot attend DELL and other study centres. The most important aspect in these programmes is that they promote self learning through interactive methods. Over the past two years more than one lac people have participated and benefited through these programmes in 369 centers. The government aims at training five lac people in 'Business English' through these programmes.

English is the only language in the world that has more number of non-native speakers compared to its native speakers. In countries like Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia or even America, where different variants of English are in use, the debate is not about the standardization of the different variants of English. In stead the conflict is with lesser spoken native aboriginal languages that form the fringes of the margins and vie for a greater acceptance. Robert Phillipson asserts that:

The advance of English whether, in Britain, North America, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand has invariably been at the expense of other languages. . . . The monolingualism in Anglo-American establishment blinds its representatives to the realities of multilingualism in the contemporary world and gives them a false perspective.

Languages that cannot survive even on these fringed margins become extinct and other languages replace them on the fringe to meet the same end over a period of time. Both India and Nepal need to popularise non-native English. Edwin Thumboo is right when he says:

. . . language must serve, not overwhelm, Mastering it involves holding down and breaching a body of habitual English association to secure that condition of verbal freedom cardinal to energetic resourceful writing. In a sense the language is remade, where necessary, by adjusting the interior landscape of words in order to explore and meditate.

Probably other countries within the region can also come together in this mammoth task of language enrichment. Just as the Americans, the Australians, and the Canadians, have gradually created their own standard Englishes we too need to work towards giving our own expressions to the English language we use and thereby making it a part of our distinctive linguistic heritage. Yes, there can be as many Englishes as there are speakers but only when the right click in computers across the world gives the option of Indian English, Nepalese English or say Asian English can it be said that yes we have clicked, right. Both the Indian and Nepalese societies are transforming. India is undergoing an economic change while Nepal is preparing for the change in the structure of governance. Change is never easy to come but when change becomes visible, as is the case in both these countries, it is sure and near.

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