

Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

English language has been playing many roles in the overall social development of the subcontinent at the same time being a controversial issue in terms of a threat to the local languages. Democracy as worldwide accepted way of political structure, its basic values and principles come through English language education into South Asia. Since education system, in any country, provides the input to the political system, thus, if the democratic political system is a common desire, the first aspect to work on must be the educational institutions. However, struggle towards democracy has been an emerging phenomenon in the overall scenario of South Asia, and English language as official language and language of education has been playing its role in it, which is not well explored. On the basis of latest research studies, a comparison has been drawn between the three important countries in order to explore what and how English language plays its role in spreading and practicing the democratic principles and values in the educational institutions.

Key Words: Democratization, Language Planning, Political Awareness, Multiculturalism

Introduction

The history of subcontinent shows that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the countries which have experienced the English rule in the region for almost a century which famously labeled as colonial rule (Milligan & Tickly, 2016). The English rule, though ended in 1947, but the ideas they introduced into the regional political culture and governance system could not be done away with. Groff (2017) mentioned that as official language English was continued with the intentions not to disrupt the existing system to avoid administrative issues. It was not an easy task for the new fledgling nations to suddenly bring about drastic changes that could stir up new social, cultural and other issues. The second reason he indicates is also an interesting one that is to choose from multiple languages being spoken as an alternative to English meant to escalate conflicts within country's multilingual groups. Bangladesh which separated from Pakistan is the reflection of local level controversies between such linguistic groups. Tackling with such issues by continuing with the then given status of English language was, however, not a long

term solution to such issues especially, when the world was moving towards democracies, when human rights were being highlighted all around the world, when minority rights were being discussed, when diversity was being accepted as a strength of any society, it was not easy to prevent local resentment against a foreign language. Muhammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan and Gandhi of India were concerned about their national languages such as Urdu for Pakistan and Hindi for India which led to a policy decision to replace English in few years but time proved that English language made its way through the system one reason or the other.

Apart from multilingual issues, there were also some problems with the ideas the westerner introduced accompanied with introducing English language into the system. First, a system created by the British rule on needs basis created a class systems in the subcontinent, which already was divided into caste systems, and the same problems is still properly not be overcome yet by the local democracies (Rahman, 2010). Even, in the present scenario the diversity in local communities could not be managed in such a way as to call it a strength of the country because these ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity that played their role in hampering the democratic process because democracy as the principle of 'the majority rule' is perplexed by the minorities with agitations due to their identity and other related issues. At the same time, the majority seems neglecting the minorities' right while in rule. It is a challenge for the leaders to educate the masses that they should be aware of the diverse languages, cultures and races as a beauty and strength of a country and democracies should develop like in the west. Regarding India's diversity in terms of languages, and language planning in education. Groff (2016) admitted that India is facing challenges in dealing with diversity especially in language planning that has implications for other minor languages also.

English language has, now, become the inevitable part of language planning and education in South Asian countries. English is considered to be a neutral language that can harmonize the diverse communities. English language commonly perceived as the language of educational development, progressive thinking and the language of high life style has a charm to all the communities living in these countries of South Asia (Rahman, 2004). For the last many decades the experimentation of harmonizing local divisions through English language is giving birth to new issues that arise from the outcomes of the English language experimentation in these countries. This study is an attempt to revisit the exiting level of the language controversy and to identify possible new roles English can play as an inevitable necessity of the Asian nations. For this purpose the perspectives of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan on English language in education are discussed briefly followed by a critical analysis of the situation with a view to explore what these nation have learned after when they have experienced English language as second language as part of their language planning at national level. The analysis focused on the role of English language, besides playing its role in 'economic development', 'globalization' and 'better prospects for its learners' as a

*Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

tool to develop democratic values in the societies in general and in educational institutions in particular.

Indian perspective

The policy makers' decisions in language planning considerably affect the linguistic minorities in the country as they face challenges such as equality of opportunities in education. Such minority students tend to have low literacy rate or drop out of schools (Jhingran, 2015). According to the definition provided by Groff (2016) language 'minorities' can be better understood by using the term 'minoritized' which mean the language that is not nationally recognized. In fact they are the people who are unable to be taught in their first language. The recognition of language at national level has implication for making decision related to language planning. The way language planning is made has its roots in the orientation of language and ideologies associated with different languages (Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity, 1998).

Ekbote (1984) has mentioned of another type of linguistic minority—recognized at state level but the speakers are not living in the state but somewhere else in the country. It means they have to face lack of learning facilities in their language. He termed such minorities as relative linguistic minorities such as the minorities are Urdu speaking citizens of India. With regard to language planning, whether explicit or implicit, the influence of country politics and power is at work in terms of legitimization of languages (Blackledge, 2008; Rahman, 2010).

Maganhatan (2011) quoted Graddol's (2010, p. 120) observation regarding the role of English in India that irrespective of what caste and class and region people belong to, have a perception that English language can transform their lives by helping them in progress and develop if they have it acquired. He further added that the demand for English is increasing but at the same time feared as a threat to local culture and languages. The author quotes an important aspect of English from the report of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2006, p. 1) that stated 'English in India today is a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life.'

Language and culture are so integrated that their difference causes teacher student communication not understandable (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). Almost 25 percent children at primary level face significant disadvantage in learning because of the fact that they are taught through second language, as they may learn some language but fail to understand the content matter taught in schools (Jhingran, 2005). Clement and Murugavel (2015) found that many engineering students in India are facing employability problems due to their lack of enough English communication abilities. He mentioned the reasons behind the deficiency in the students are quality of teaching and management because the prior has problems

related to teaching methodologies while the later aspect lacks in providing learning facilities to the students.

Bala (2016) reported that there are more than 642 universities in India. One university, on average, serves approximately 20 thousand populations. Both in terms of quantity and quality the access to higher education is insufficient while higher education should enable the youth to compete international economy (Sheikh, 2017). Transparency and accountability of higher education in India need improvement as the private sector, mostly run by politicians, is contributing more than the public sector but lacking in quality management. The figure of private universities amounts to over 60% of the total higher education institution out of 677 universities till 2014 (Sheikh, 2017). Out of these institutions 7 universities are reported to be among the top 500 universities

In context of English language competencies of the learner in higher education of Indian, Omidvar and Sukumar (2013) indicated the role of English as a source of interdisciplinary teaching and teach in global perspective for example global issues such globalization, poverty, peace, environment and human rights. They admitted that English language learners should be able to communicate in all these issues only then they may be called successful learners. They stated that in addition to input of learning, learners need to have opportunities and conditions to negotiate meaning through communication. Critical thinking opportunities are not provided in the current teaching methodologies which is an essential for cognitive development in order to make the learners aware of the world issues.

Bangladesh perspective

Bangla is the national language of Bangladesh. In terms of linguistic diversity Bangladesh has an advantage over the other two Asian countries because its 99% population speaks Bangla while English is taught as a second language. Regarding language planning Bangladesh has given a prominent place for its national language Bangla declaring it as national and official language but the place of English has not been well determined yet. Bangladesh higher education figures show higher contribution of private sector than the public as the number of public and private universities is 40 and 95 respectively, with three international universities (UGC of Bangladesh, 2017). The private sector is using English as a medium of instruction. Problems related to quality of English teaching and learning identified are lack of practice, lack of English teachers, improper teaching methods, lack of conducive environment, lack of library facilities, only writing exercises in the classroom, lack of reading and listening practices and lack of use of technology and teacher feedback (Akteruzzaman & Islam, 2007: Hossain, 2016).

In Bangladesh education system English is introduced the school curriculum at and at tertiary level it is taught as a mandatory subject (Akteruzzaman, & Islam, 2017). Akteruzzaman and Islam (2007) mentioned that the quality of English language teaching between rural and urban areas of Bangladesh, which is a

*Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

common phenomenon across the developing countries of the subcontinent. Another type of division is upper class and lower class who are different in terms of accessibility to quality of education especially in teaching English.

In Bangladesh the role of English in globalization is given much importance and it focuses on producing learners with communication skills at international level. This fact is reflected in the country's educational policy that introduced the English version of curriculum that promoted English medium instruction at private universities and English is considered as a mandatory subject in all public sector universities (Imam, 2007; Rahman, 2015). Imam (2007) takes on a different stance on English language teaching in Bangladesh. She raises questions on why are millions of dollars being invested in language programs like English Language Teaching (ELT) and Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)" quoting further Roger Bowers, one of a senior officers from British Council who said, 'we have... a vested interest in maintaining the role of English as a language, and of British ELT as a trade and profession' (471).

Hamid (2010) mentioned that all over the world the spread of English due to the phenomenon of globalization is being more demanded but in country like Bangladesh insufficient resources, quality of teaching are some of the prominent problems which make English language learning difficult to the poor. "To what extent the national language or code mixing of English and Bangla is permitted in the classroom is a matter of investigation (p 151, 152). In the existing education system of Bangladesh the place of the national language and English seem to be in right place in the public sector. English language, in public sector, is taught only as a mandatory subject due to nationalist approach, and English as MOI in private sector universities is due to its instrumental role (Hamid, 2013). As regards to quality of higher education, Bangladesh has got none of its universities in the top 500 ranking (*Dhaka Tribune*, September, 4, 2014; Quacquarelli Symond (QS) for the year 2016-17).

Pakistani perspective

In Pakistan English was continued with the status of official language as it was during British rule in India. Both India and Pakistan (Bangladesh as a part of Pakistan at that time) adopted similar approach towards English. In Pakistan the first policy draft of 1959 had declared that English would continue to be the medium of instruction in higher education and will be replaced as soon as possible and arrangements will be made for Urdu to replace English. India even specified the period of 15 and then English was supposed to be replaced by Hindi. Both the countries could not implement their language policy and English continued to be the official language till now. Historical discussion on the controversy about the role of English is still there, however in the context of higher education the medium is declared to be English in Pakistan (Aly, 2007; Rahman, 2010). The

global forces have a significant role in decision making in Pakistan regarding language policy, planning and implementation. This symbolic value of English; that is English being as a symbol of quality might be the cause of increasing the number of private English medium schools during the last two decades (Shamim, 2008; Gulzar, 2010).

Khan (2013) mentions that English medium instruction is accepted as compulsory in Pakistani universities at post-graduation level studies, however its implementation is not in full practice. Among the challenge to the implementation enlisted are: multilingualism, multiculturalism and ethnicity (Khan 2013; Shamim, 2008). As far as implementation of a monolingual policy is concerned even America faces problems in spite of having world most diverse population.

Rahman (2010) has a great work into the English language related issues in Pakistan. According to him English is taught in many educational institutions but the quality of English being taught has created a great difference between the students of elite class being education in highly expensive private schools while those are taught English lower private and public institutions depict an abysmal situation. Regarding its demand in Pakistan he states that English being the language of well-paid jobs is attracting more and more people. He states that English roams around the elite while other face difficulties in learning while it is the desire of every one to learn English as it thought to have role of connecting people from outside world and also it is the source of developing modern thinking such as liberalistic and democratic values. He has well described the actual situation of English in Pakistan:

The demand for English is not incompatible with the fact that many people resent it. They resent it for various reasons: anti-colonial sentiment, feeling that the quest for English is servile and hence against national prestige, or because they do not know it, cannot afford to buy it and feel cheated. At the same time most people actually want to learn it because they feel sure that the system will not change and if they, or the children, do not know English they will always stay, as it were, in the ghettos (p.243).

As regards higher education, unlike India and Bangladesh, in Pakistan the public sector is more contributing terms of number of instructions which amounts to 91% of higher education institutions are in public sector but for quality Pakistan is far behind as it has no single university in the top 500 universities of the world (Quacquarelli Symond (QS) for the year 2016-17; *The News: September, 2016*).

Comparative analysis

On the basis of the above three perspectives of these countries some important themes can be deduced in order to determine the role and influence of English language in promoting democratic values in the educational institutions of these post colonial countries. The significance of this comparison is that it might bring a

*Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

broader picture of the similar and different situations across countries, consequently helping people and policy makers to develop a better understanding of experiencing English as a second language in their countries and these countries are in better position to make clear decisions about the role of English language in their mainstream education system after when they have learnt from the outcomes of English language in their education and government systems.

The comparison would further help them to determine what possible new roles can be identified that English as MOI can play, among other roles, to help inculcate democratic values in the educational institutions. These are the three countries which almost share many problems though they may differ in nature and magnitude of the problems and the way they progress but all they desire and effort to become ideal democracies for which they need to curb extremism from their societies.

Current status on English as MOI (medium of instruction)

When we look at the perspective of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan the studies show that English is both desired and at the same time seen as a challenge for the local culture and languages (Groff, 2017; Imam, 2016; Rahman, 2010). There are widespread perceptions that English is considered to be a gateway to progress and prosperity, perhaps that's why research studies in each of the countries report an increasing demand for English language (Agnihotri, 2007). When we compare these countries with a view to examine the educational context and the English language it is obvious that English language learning and accessibility to its desired quality is very expensive for majority of the local learners. In Bangladesh the number of private sector higher education institutions are more than double in number than in public sector and English is the medium of instruction in private sector universities while the public sector English is taught as mandatory subject (Akterurzzaman & Islam, 2007; UGC of Bangladesh, 2017; Hossain, 2016; Rahman, 2015). India has similar situation as Bangladesh as she has 60% of institution belonging to the private sector (Bala, 2016; Sheikh, 2017).

In Pakistan the situation is totally opposite in which the share of public sectors institution of higher education is 91% (Government of Pakistan, 2011). Overall India's performance seems better than both Pakistan and Bangladesh because India has 7 universities in the top 500 universities of the world on the Quacquarelli Symond (QS) for the year 2016-17 ranking, while Bangladesh and Pakistan have none of their universes among the top 500 (Dhaka Tribune, September, 2014); (The News, September 7, 2016). Although people associate progress and development with English language learning, while such a role of English is clouded by the poor quality of education in these countries. However even quality of education is associated with better English learning by some experts (Maganhatan, 2011).

Issues associated with English as language of education

Since India's magnitude of linguistic and cultural diversity is wider than that of Pakistan and Bangladesh, thus more resistance toward English learning can be a challenge from the local languages as English is thought to be a barrier to equal educational opportunities (Rahman, 2010; Shamim, 2008). In spite of this India's progress in education and technology is appreciable which is comparatively better than both Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan is also a multilingual society but if only linguistic diversity were the problem Bangladeshi would have progressed because Bangla is the national language spoken by almost 98% of its population, therefore, it is not hard to imagine that only English cannot be the sole cause of all developments (Imam, 2016).

The problems these countries are having are related to lack of efficiency in other sectors of societies such politically stability that directly affects education system and its accountability mechanism (Clement & Murugavel, 2015; Omidvar & Sukumar, 2013).

As for national languages of these countries are concerned, mostly because of fear of dominance of English language over the national languages, the local communities show resentment and resistance which hamper the state level policies on English language (Muzmuder, 2014). Groff (2016) has explored language diversity with respect to language policy and planning as it has implications for the linguistic minorities and their educational opportunities. He stated that though, unlike other nations, India's concerns for linguistic diversity has been increasing yet the policies are not explicit and need to emphasis on insuring justice in terms of access to educational opportunities (Farooq & Naveed, 2015; Hossain, 2016). The list of issues about language planning at national level in all of these three countries is too large to mention in few lines. What can be concluded is that these nations need to determine the place of English as foreign language and their own national languages in their language policies more clearly.

English language, curriculum and content knowledge

Mazumder (2014) mentioned that self-regulated learning-- an important tool for independent thinking for developing democratic values which is lacking in our university education, it also helps in developing motivation and high competence level among the learners. He pointed out three aspects of self-regulated learning: cognition, motivation and goal directed behavior. He puts forward the conclusion of his study that with the globalization phenomenon, higher education and the students of higher education develop motivation in them and prepare themselves as independent learners given the vast knowledge available to them in this modern era. This aspect needs to be readdressed that human liberty, independent thinking are the democratic values need conscious efforts in the educational institution, which consequently would transform the whole of a society. Again it depends on

*Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

the quality of English in the educational institutions and deliberate effort to make best use of English for promoting democratic values.

Public education sector has failed to provide equal facilities while private sector focuses on quality but also focusing on investment where the demand is high so that they could earn out of it. Omidvar and Sukumar (2013) seem to recognize the role of English language as an interdisciplinary learning; especially in the context of higher education in India as they have well identified the nature of issues such as globalization, poverty, environment and human right on which English language learners are expected to have the competence to communicate. They further indicate that critical thinking opportunities are not being provided to them in our educational institutions. These issues should also be debated in universities with a view to promote democratic attitude also because these are the issues in which the message of human rights can be propagated which is undeniably an important component of democratic attitudes.

Effect of English language on learners: Outcomes will guide future policies

Imam (2017) criticizes the highly and the few expensive private English medium schools that they might become good at Roman, Greek or Chinese history but they are unfamiliar with their own national language and culture. Rahman (2010) gives similar observation regarding the elite class English medium schools and the products of these schools that feel alienated and show no sympathy with their own countryman. As far India is concerned, it being a liberal society has less conflicting ideological issues with learning English language and its widespread across the country. Their nationalistic feeling are not much hurt as Pakistan and Bangladesh because these countries have Islamic ideologies which are commonly perceived to be in clash with the western values—they fear through English their ideological values might come under threat. Some writers from both Pakistan and Bangladesh give the following description of the few elites who are being educated in English medium and who are taught books written for and in UK context.

From Bangladesh perspectives Imam (2017) states about the English learners from the highly expensive private institution that “They tend to look down on students from Bangla medium schools...many English medium students see themselves as only temporarily in Bangladesh, with their ultimate destination and English speaking country” (p. 479). The observation given by these authors are susceptible to criticism because such behaviors cannot be generalized. As university teacher in public sector it can be noticed that students with high proficiency in English are more aware of politics and human rights, show more respect for others’ opinions as compared to those who are not competent in English. In short ‘looking down upon’ if accepted to be true is cultural phenomenon for example the rich may look down upon the poor. Albeit it can be

recognized that those elite class learners might feel alienated due to their cognitive dissonance because what they study in their schools is not found in their surroundings.

English language in educational institutions and promotion of democratic values

English is not only a language but a language of a culture which has developed out of great human efforts that has given a different look to human life on earth. It has great writers, critiques, scientist and progress in terms of sciences and technology. These factors contributed to the development of English language and people naturally found source to solution of common human problems. Even one finds comfortable to express ones' self in English which in other language do not provide the opportunity as suppressive cultures are reflected in the language they are expressed.

Hossain (2016) highlights the positive aspects of English language that it has rich expressions allowing people to communicate their feeling, emotions and ideas in a better way. English language is also reflective of democratic values that promote respect for others privacy, opinion and criticism. These aspects of life are not well developed in the local culture and local languages. Besides, it's a natural drive that less developed nations follow developed nations and in order to do so language becomes a bridging source (Rahman, 2010).

Conclusions and recommendations

As Maganhatan (2011, p. 27) well said that 'while the demand for English is on the increase on one hand the quality of English language education in state run schools presents an abysmal picture'. Increasing demands for English language is also one of the results of peoples' desire to adopt the democratic way of governances as can be seen in English speaking countries. Democracy is a way life which is understood only when the attitudes are also understood, along with the language associated with them, and also practiced. Those who argue against English language and its role in the post-colonial countries miss out one important reality that only those languages influence other because their speakers are well developed and present an exemplary role for those who are underdeveloped. The developing countries though have been putting a lot of effort to use English for other many purposes but teaching the language along with attitudes that reflect basic understanding of democracy as a way of life is lacking. This role can be taken up more by educational institutions. As a result the society will learn why and how English has so developed. That's how these societies can be transformed into democracies in true sense and English language can be used for such purposes without necessarily, totally 'englishizing' the local communities. As for quality of English teaching these Asian countries can develop a strategy to help each other

*Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

through research and sharing information on language policies and plans in order to support each other as they have more or less similar nature of problems.

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***Influence of English Language in Political Awareness of South Asian Societies: A
Comparative Study of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh***

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