
Revisiting Ideology in English Language Teaching: Towards Pedagogies of Decolonization

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Abstract

As a language that assures upward mobility, English may have been framed as a language of power, but its pedagogical dimension is indubitably seen as an unproblematic, value-free cognitive activity marked by ideological neutrality. Such a theorization is deeply embedded in its utilitarian value in the increasingly globalizing world. However, neo-Marxian critique of education in the last quarter of the twentieth century has underscored the politics inherent in pedagogical practices through which English is taught in academic institutions. On closer analysis, such a critique evidently forges continuities between the colonial and postcolonial agenda of ELT as a tool for ideological manipulation. The object of the paper is to locate and critique the continuities between policies and practices that govern ELT in these eras. In doing so the popular methodologies of ELT will be investigated and possibilities of devising an alternative pedagogical model will be discussed.

Keywords: ELT, ideology, critical pedagogy, Indian literature, translation, decolonization

“Hi, my name is Akash and I am from India. I dream of working in a call centre, but I’ve MTI (Mother Tongue Influence). How am I supposed to get rid of it? Please help.” (Quoted in Giridhardas, 2008, para. 12).

Popular humanistic conception of education in general and language learning in particular dictates that these processes, idealistically imagined to be great levellers in the socio-cultural system, iron out inequalities operating at the level of class, caste, religion, language, and culture. The logic behind conflating the categories of education and

language learning derives from the fact that language constitutes the primary vehicle through which education is furnished; knowledge is produced, processed, and disseminated in language and it is through language that power and self are negotiated. Against the backdrop of this understanding, English has come to be seen as a vector of power and material success in a world globalizing and digitizing at a breakneck pace. A group of Indian scholars who have upheld the role of English in bestowing empowerment across multifarious divides of Indian society are not unjustified in celebrating the prowess of the language; it has certainly helped remove historical barriers to knowledge acquisition stacked against the marginalized. However, they are not isolated in singing hosannas to the Goddess of English; many corporate gurus and management maestros too have ferociously argued for English education. However, what is problematic and grossly simplistic about this position is that it constructs haves and have-nots of the colonial language in monolithic terms.

Evidently English in this debate is pitted against the bhashas which, with their centuries-old rich literary, philosophical, and intellectual traditions, have a greater connect with the cultural roots, shared memories, and collective consciousness of the masses. While not completely discounting the merits of English education in contemporary India, it would be too naïve to posit that the language and its pedagogy are immune to any kind of politics or ideological manipulations or that it unconditionally enables democratization, social equity, and mobility. Akash's cry for help imparts another complicating dimension to the debate of language of instruction and education in India and renders jingoistic positions reductionist and redundant. His testimony underscores the two-fold truism that the English-speaking is a highly differentiated category with inherent strata and hierarchies and that sheer knowledge of the language is not a passport to social mobility and professional success. What is it that keeps Akash away from professional success despite his MTI-hued command over English? Why is he so ostensibly averse to what his mother tongue has to offer him? Would his dream really come true if he rid himself of his MTI? These are uneasy questions that defy easy answers.

Another argument advanced by the votaries of English is the language being the harbinger of modernity, newer cultural meanings, altered structural realities and reformed psychological orientations in the contemporary history of India following globalization which

concomitantly sparked off unprecedented demand for English-speaking workforce. Systematic studies undertaken in this regard (Swinder, 2001; Derne, 2005) have convincingly shown that this has not been the case. Not surprisingly, theorists like Harish Trivedi have tried to locate English education in its present avatar as instrumental in production of an army of “cyber coolies” (Das, 2003), a term he uses to designate Indians working in mushrooming call centres in India. Add to this the ever-inflating battery of service sector workers and one gets a sizeable population of young India well-versed in the functional variety of English but unable to construct a sustainable discourse in the language. They may be responsive to western/American modernity but still be walled-in by the divisions of caste, class, gender and creed. They may sing paeans to the virtues of industry, humility and loyalty but unfortunately be indifferent to their life-condition and the socio-political establishment that shrewdly structures it.

Many scholars and theorists working in the realm of philosophy and praxis of education have advanced radical positions criticizing the highly partisan and manipulative role educational institutions play in conditioning the behaviour and developing the personality traits of students. Avant-garde contentions of these theorists have destabilized the humanistic and liberal foundations on which the edifice of institutionalized education supposedly stands and have identified these sites as loci of political manoeuvring and domesticating machinery. A group of neo-Marxist thinkers have brought about a paradigm shift in the field by undertaking a study of the political history of education in the wake of the industrial revolution; they famously contended that education replaced religion in the mid-nineteenth century as a force to maintain social status quo and upper-class hegemony.

English Language Teaching (ELT hereafter) in India has turned into nothing short of a booming industry with both organized and unorganized sectors scrambling with all their pedagogical might to tempt aspirants with dreams of stepping into global economy. Following their Anglophone models, universities in India have established full-fledged departments in ELT, isolating it from literary studies and further, invented functional specializations like English as Second Language (ESL), English for Special Purposes (ESP) and so on with their corresponding pedagogic models. The principal premise of this paper is to postulate that ELT as a discipline in India suffers from historical amnesia and its pedagogical apparatus and practices are continuous with colonial models and motivations. The

discipline has failed to respond to Akash's angst and paranoia and one of the primary reasons for this failure is that ELT in India has not been amenable to post-colonial socio-cultural realities; rather than cementing, it has reinforced the rift between classes and masses that colonial English struck; its poetics and pedagogics have effectively recast it in a scientific, cognitive, positivist and utilitarian frame thus blinding the learners to the language's problematic historicity and political function. While elaborating upon how this has been systematically carried out, an attempt will also be made in this paper to search for alternative pedagogies that would alleviate some of the uncertainties, challenges and anxieties, mentioned above.

To comprehend the typically derivative nature of pedagogic practices currently prevalent in ELT and their academic and psycho-social implications, I propose to survey the mammoth project of language study that the British undertook in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India. This was also the period in which high-decibel polemic over the language of instruction in education was kicked up among orientalist, vernacularist, and Anglicist who strongly advocated education of Indian subjects in Sanskrit/Persian, vernaculars, and English respectively. Though Nativists eventually lost ground to the Anglicists whose discourse on imperial education policy reached its apogee in the (in)famous Minute of Macaulay (1835), it is significant to note that despite apparent contradictions in interests and difference of opinions, the three discourses were sensitive to the overlaps and convergences in political implications of their respective ideologies which markedly undergirded the colonial project. Susie Tharu has expressed it categorically,

they conceived of education as a means of shaping Indian subjects, who, equipped with disciplined minds and bodies, would not only be in a better position to understand Imperial laws, but also have the necessary ethical discrimination and mental cultivation to desire and appreciate the rational, humane and impartial government that the new rulers were trying to set up. (1998, p. 5)

The vernaculars were made compulsory study for imperial officers who, equipped with these languages, would supposedly be in a better position to understand peculiar rituals, customs, mores, beliefs etc. of the natives and consequently control them effectively. On the other hand, the purpose behind studying elite languages like Sanskrit and

Persian was two-fold in nature. First, what the British naively termed as the imperial effort to preserve and promote the 'traditions' of the colonized, and second,

...what the Europeans defined as 'discoveries' of the wisdom of the ancients, the analogy being the restoration of Greek and Roman thought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries...the end being to construct a history of relationship between India and the West, to classify and locate their civilizations on an evaluative scale of progress and decay. (Cohn, 1996, p. 46)

To accomplish this mission, the British undertook the colossal project of textualizing India through unceasing production of grammars, dictionaries, language histories, religious texts, classbooks etc. on and translations from Indian languages. The inevitable fall-out of this formulation of new epistemological space fashioned and adjusted in terms of European categories was the formation of a distinct monolithic discourse under which Indian macro-traditions were selectively "museumised" and specific cultural categories were essentialized. What is of particular interest here is the fact that some of the pedagogical practices and academic assumptions undergirding the colonial project are internalized by the discipline of ELT as it exists in India today.

One of the fundamental problems with the language learning and teaching in colonial India was the bizarre conceptualization of language as a pure phenomenon which existed in its pristine form in past but which got alloyed over a period through interpretation, commentaries, local usage and periodic wear and tear. Perhaps, this was why the Orientalists turned to Sanskrit and Persian over the vernaculars in their search for the essential cultural and knowledge traditions of Indian subcontinent. Consequently, for example, when William Jones hunkered down to compile *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), he naturally prescribed grammatical principles based on his reading of Persian poetry written in Shiraz literary dialect between the tenth and fifteenth centuries AD and not contemporary Persian literature (Cohn, 1996). On the other hand, the Orientalists scholars provided an elaborate commentary on the phonetics, morphology and syntax of different Indian languages, something which grammar and vocabulary-based approaches to ELT undertake in classrooms today. Indicatively, almost all the anthologies prescribed in Indian schools and universities for learning English before the advent of more progressive models like Audio-lingual Method (ALM)

and Cognitive Learning Theories (CLT) compiled poems, stories, essays and excerpts from novels and autobiographies written by Romantic and Victorian writers. It is obvious that the curriculum development committees in many Indian universities have privileged trite and highfalutin Victorian variety of English over a contemporary idiom probably in deference to colonial fascination with the chastity and accuracy of language. In his grammar, Jones also mouthed common linguistic platitudes on acquisition of fluency, native-like accent and pronunciation through interaction with native speakers of language. It would be instructive to note that ALM, which presupposes a formal set-up like a language laboratory, is also marked by an over-emphasis on repetition and accuracy in language acquisition. In such classrooms, students are made to listen repeatedly to recordings of conversations—which replicate Anglophone situations, cultural contexts and modes of articulation - and their attention is focused on accurate mimicry of the pronunciation and grammatical structures in these pre-recorded interactions. Clearly, this kind of pedagogy would produce only a set of “mimic men”.

In his remarkable first novel *English August: An Indian Story* (1988), Upamanyu Chatterjee forcefully uses the leitmotif of language to foreground the complexity of cultural identity in multilingual Indian context. Various characters in the novel dwell passionately upon the role, status and legitimacy of English in India vis-à-vis bhashas. Chatterjee strongly condemns the fact that the conditions of production and consumption of education and its technologies have not changed the unequal power relations between the educational producers and the peripheral consumers. The point is, rather than becoming a facilitating mechanism, such a teaching methodology alienates Indian students from their existing socio-cultural milieu as well as the contemporary idiom and local texture which English has come to acquire over decades in India. Such approaches to ELT are unmindful of the fact that because a language is used in a socio-cultural matrix, which is always in flux and transition, it is subject to constant mutation and miscegenation. This tendency for self-reinvention and reinvigoration imparts a language not only a distinct freshness and richness but also enlivening topicality and relevance. The key lies in creating a class of speakers who speak English “but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89) as a way of building resistance to the hegemony and class-consciousness of English in India.

Another problematic notion cherished by Oriental scholars was the denigration of the vernaculars as “fallen, broken or corrupt versions of

some pure authentic, coherent, logically formed prior language.” (Cohn, 1996, p. 33) In his *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1778), Halhed called Bengali the daughter of Sanskrit, something which was reiterated in case of a number of vernaculars later. Despite this low opinion for the vernaculars, a sizeable number of scholars and administrators couldn't ignore them and advocated their use as media of instruction in primary and secondary education. But the difficulty lay in quantifying and negotiating the immense diversity in form and usage of these vernaculars as one travelled from region to region. Such variety in texture and timbre foiled the ruler's plan to disseminate colonial ideology and culture through these languages and consequently the British resolved to undertake their standardization through grammars and dictionaries. Interestingly, in carrying out these tasks, the colonizer's fixation with the idea of evolving a pure and refined language made Halhed expunge Bengali of all Urdu and Persian words and led C.P. Brown to resort to reverse lexicography as he attempted to standardize and sanitize several Telugu texts with the help of professors of Sanskrit and Telugu (Cohn, 1996). The knowledge of vernacular was also deemed expedient for the company servants in as much as it helped them in carrying out the work of assessing and collecting revenues and adjudicating land disputes (Roy, 1994). Officers like J.B. Gilchrist, who wrote the grammar of Hindustani (1796) and a dictionary to equip the rulers with a means of direct communication with the masses, gave imaginative accounts of the origins of Hindustani and tried to invent spicy narratives about its love-hate relationship with classical languages. William Carey published *Dialogues* (1825) on various real-life situations that the Englishmen were to encounter in India. In addition to facilitate interaction with the native servants on domestic matters like bringing food, preparing for travel etc., the dialogues primarily served the function of putting the native “on his guard”—what Althusser calls creating subject position (2001, p. 115) by issuing an interpellative command ‘*sunno*’ [Listen!]. What is worse, the dialogues served to entrench certain stereotypes about the natives as being stupid, irresponsible, careless, docile but ignorant, lethargic, work-shirk and so on and fashioned the Englishman as their binary opposite. Thus, the discourse framed the Englishman and the native subject as a mutually exclusive pair; one commands and the other obeys, one is knowledgeable while the other is ignorant, one is superior, and the other is inferior.

Ironically, the same methodology of language learning is zealously

imitated in ELT classroom today and recognized as the most effective way to teach second and foreign languages. CLT recommends what is called the notional-functional syllabus under which a notion denotes a specific social context and function refers to a variety of purposeful expressions that a speaker normally uses to handle it. For example, to communicate tolerably well in a specific context like 'shopping', an interlocutor is most likely to use functions like greeting, request, polite questions, invitation and so on; a set of alternative expressions for all these functions are taught to students in ELT classrooms. One really wonders whether this functional approach to language teaching is not differentially targeting students like Akash who are able to parrot out and mimic a standard set of functions but are woefully immune to a variety of inequalities and oppressions they are subjected to. The command of English the cyber collies flaunt with a sense of self-importance is certainly not the language of command in the colonial sense but its obverse. The neo-Marxists stand vindicated in their thesis especially when students like Akash readily become the receptacle of such oppression and mediocritization.

In his remarkably insightful book *Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, Pennycook calls attention to the paradoxes English has come to represent in post-colonial societies. He says,

...it is both the language of modernity and the language of decadence, the 'first language' (the medium of education) but not the 'mother tongue' (the racially assigned language), a neutral medium of communication yet the bearer of Western values, the language of equality and yet the distributor of inequality. (1994, p. 255)

Despite inhering such contradictions, English remains the most desirable language among the masses and powerfully anchors the discourses of pragmatism, materialism and globalism that underpin its hegemony. However, this hardly means that all the possibilities of resistance stand aborted in a socio-cultural context marked by a huge diversity of spoken languages. In fact, peripheral resistance to English is very much visible in the realms of the literary and the social. The discipline of Cultural Studies has framed post-colonial and diasporic contexts through the concept of "hybridity" to theorize how colonized and border cultures develop by synthesizing themselves out of elements of multiple cultures. Post-colonial discourse has emphasized the mutuality of the process of colonization i.e. how distinctive aspects of the culture of the colonized

resist obliteration even under the most potent colonial oppression and, in turn, become the integral part of the new formations ensuing cultural confrontation. Such cultural hybridity builds in immense positive value in as much as it forecloses pigeonholing into the old binaries and realizes the possibility of non-monolithic cultural exchange. Even in the extremely vibrant digital realm where English is the singular medium of navigation and interpersonal communication among users of varying demography, nationalities, and culture, it is mediated by spoken languages, ethnic idiom, unique lingo, and symbolism. This increasing informal character of English in cyber space serves to formulate a cohesive group and develop communitarian solidarity amongst users. Concerns have been raised about the negative impact of communication technologies and internet-based applications on the overall English proficiency of learners as they facilitate deviation from standard and pure English. On the other hand, several surveys and experiments have proved the superior efficacy of technology-enabled learning methodologies over their traditional counterpart on ground that technology improves social interactions between students which in turn expedites and facilitates knowledge production and knowledge sharing. Pros and cons of informalization notwithstanding, it needs to be reaffirmed that the digital sphere as a space of cross-linguistic negotiation is extremely important for one it mirrors emergent social realities and further, it is becoming increasingly popular as a pedagogical tool in English language classrooms.

In post-colonial societies where hybridity is the defining principle of lived realities, the English language teacher can no longer hide in his/her ideologically blind cocoon and chant the glory of Standard English bequeathed by the colonial masters. She must develop a historical perspective on her profession as well as language and overhaul the teaching methodology, curricular patterns and overall ideology in order to make ELT progressively relevant, counterhegemonic and democratizing force. The pedagogical practices in ELT classrooms should be responsive to the emergent communication trends and practices in social-cultural sphere so as to positively impact popular misconceptions and the psychodynamics that freeze people in linguistic stratification. Given below is an analysis of certain promising pedagogic models formulated by Indian scholars in this regard.

Makarand Paranjape's theory of vernacularization highlights the significance of translational intervention in not only reconfiguring

the asymmetry of power between English and vernaculars but also in reflecting the multilingual and multicultural realities of India. To Paranjape, English represents “Anglo-centric monoculturalism” which peripheralizes vernacular linguistic spaces and multicultural worldviews and so, he makes a call to juxtapose “Indian English, that is, not just the language, but its entire range of literary and cultural production, with its con-texts” (2010, p. 98), i.e. “contrary portrayals of India” found in vernacular literatures. Since the vast multiversity and complexity of India as a cultural system cannot be contained in a single language, he pleads “for a process of continuous vernacularization—a vernacularization not only of English, but of the whole project of modernity and nationalism.” (p. 99) Paranjape accords primacy to regional literatures over Indian English literature in terms of its perspicacity and capacity to represent Indian realities and advocates the expansion of colonial framework to accommodate multilingual instruction and multilingual curriculum. Further, his model also entails nativization and hybridization of English through deft use of linguistic strategies like collocational deviation, semantic shift, loan words, calque, syntactic disruptions, and literal translation etc. so as to enable it to convey Indian realities, cultural milieu and ‘Indianness’. The operationalization of this avant-garde model in the classroom, according to him, would hardly facilitate upward mobility—much touted by the apologists of globalization—but in effect, a “downward mobility”, a movement towards masses and not classes. It naturally emerges from the above discussion that an Indian student will come across a cline of Englishes in such a classroom which would sensitize her not only to the linguistic but existential diversity of the country. Preferably, the focus of vernacularized curricula should be on the study of such translations as would explore a whole continent of experience so far left to silence and darkness i.e. the literature of the marginalized. (Satchidanandan, 2008, p. 40).

Harish Trivedi’s *panchadhatu* model, proposed in his book *Colonial Transactions: English literature and India* (1995), is calibrated for English literature classrooms of Indian universities; however, its democratizing potential can be explored by ELT classrooms too with a little bit of customization. In addition to making room for literatures written in English by authors from England and other countries from three worlds, Trivedi makes a call for including English translations of literatures written in other languages. What makes the model radical is the fourth and the fifth tiers, which advocate studying literature written in the local

languages and one of the classical languages, but not in translation. In so far as every language is a unique way of perceiving worlds, making students enter a new language would facilitate an entry into a new universe, a new worldview, and a set of new experiences. In India this might not be very difficult at least with studying cognate languages in classrooms; eventually, the scope can be expanded to distant languages as well. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Translation in the Undergraduate Curriculum" (2022), a kind of live update on Trivedi's model, defines the methodology of teaching translation in classroom spaces in order to turn them increasingly multilingual, both in terms of pedagogy and syllabi.

It goes without saying, these models are open to a choose-and-pick pedagogy or contextual customization. However, what remains common to them is the democratizing mission to be obtained at the levels of curricula development and language teaching. Apart from this, ELT has to curate the classroom space afresh, from being an imperious space to its new avatar of becoming a democratic space. A very effective way of doing this is adoption of Critical Pedagogy, a radical pedagogical innovation posited by Paulo Freire (2000). Rather than supplanting extant pedagogical models, critical pedagogy supplements them by imparting elements of critical engagement, democratic thinking, and deconstruction to them. Critical pedagogy classrooms stand in opposition to colonial classrooms with magisterial climate, "with physically divided spaces marking off once class of students from another, as well as teachers from students", with regular examinations measuring acquisition of fixed body of knowledge (Cohn, 1996, p. 48). Conversely, the non-formal setting of classroom space would encourage students to initiate dialogue with teachers and peers without pressure and fear of examination or punishment. In India, critical pedagogy promises to bring out the contexts of power that define socio-political relationship amongst them. With its 'multi' realities—lingual, cultural, religious, ethnic—such critical curricula would be a technology of decolonization and build cross-cultural bridges amongst a large variety of linguistically isolated locations.

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