

Sociolinguistic and Socio-psychological factors behind learning English in Manipur (India)

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Abstract

Languages in a multilingual and multicultural setting form a system network. Each language in this network has a function-determined value. A society or a government can assign a new value to any one of the languages in the system network in terms of its own policy of language planning; but it must realize that this assignment of a new value to a language will produce a chain reaction in the network. The values of the other languages in the network are bound to undergo changes as well. Moreover, effective bilingualism or multilingualism is a powerful way of enriching the linguistic repertoire of individuals. Generally, the learners of English in Manipur are mostly bilinguals or multilinguals. English language to them is a second language after their respective mother-tongues. In their ordinary walks of life, among their respective communities, they may carry out day-to-day transactions through regional languages or mother tongues. But when the question of contact with the outsiders arise, they have to render this task in a common link language and that language is not any other region-specific languages but English, because it's sphere is not limited to any particular community. Moreover, English is a widely spoken language today. It has often been referred to as the lingua franca of the modern world. It is said to be the world's most important language having communicative and educative-instrumental value. The use of English all over the world now is not out of sheer imposition, but because of the realization of its advantages. In a multilingual interaction, no single language caters to all the needs of the particular languages and they are rather determined by pragmatic demands of the situation and the institutional factors of identification. The present papers attempts to highlight the social variability and the motivation affecting the teaching and learning of English language in a multilingual social context of Manipur, a small hilly terrain in India's North-East.

Key words: Multilingualism, Language planning, Lingua franca, Pragmatism, Motivation.

Introduction:

Manipur is a state in north-eastern India, with Imphal as its capital city. It is bounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west. Myanmar lies to the eastern side of the state. The state covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers and has a population of 28,55,794 (according to 2011 census report), including the Meetei, who are the majority group in the state, Naga, Kuki and Manipuri Pangal (Muslim) people, who speak a variety of Sino-Tibetan languages. Besides, Nepalis and Marwaris also form a major chunk of the population in the state. The Meetei ethnic group represents 26.3% of the population of Manipur. The main language of the state is Manipuri (also known as *Meeteilon*). In addition to Manipuri language, some main tribal languages/dialects spoken in Manipur are Tangkhul, Thadou-Kuki, Paite, Kabui, Mao, Hmar, Liangmei, Kom, Lushai, etc. By comparison, indigenous tribal population constitutes more than 20% of the state. They are distinguished by dialects and cultures that are often village-based. Manipur's ethnic

groups practice a variety of religions. According to 2011 census, Hinduism is the major religion in the state, closely followed by Christianity. Other religions include Islam, *Sanamahism*¹, Buddhism, etc.

In Manipur, Manipuri is the predominant language, the official language in government offices and the *lingua franca* of the masses. It is also spoken in the other Indian states of Assam and Tripura, and in Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, it is currently classified as a vulnerable language by UNESCO. It is a Tibeto-Burman language whose exact classification remains unclear. It has lexical resemblances to Kuki and Tangkhul Naga. The Manipuri language has been considered as the integrating factor among all ethnic groups in Manipur, who use it to communicate among themselves. It has been recognized by the Indian union and has been included in the list of scheduled languages (included in the 8th schedule by the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992). Apart from being a medium of instruction upto the undergraduate level, Manipuri is taught as a subject up to the Post-Graduate and Ph.D. level in many universities of India.

Manipur is a place where, in addition to a very rich linguistically diverse landscape, there is Manipuri, English and Hindi used for communication. As a consequence of multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages coexisting in a symbiotic relationship, language contact situation arise where languages tend to influence each others in significant ways. The question concerning the study of the relative importance of language in social transformation and linguistic interference is a new one in the context of Manipur and it is rather a complex area as well. Of course, some Britishers had done spadework on the social history of Manipur. Hudson's *The Meithei*, Brown's *Statistical Account of Manipur*, Dun's *Gazetteer of Manipur*, Pemberton's *Report on the North-Eastern Frontier of British India*, 1966, Johnstone's *Manipur and Naga Hills*, 1971 etc., are some of the important works which give an account of the state of education of Manipur. However, being foreigners, they suffered from a number of limitations. Attempts also have been made by some scholars like L. Ibungohal, R.K. Jhalajit, J. Roy and others to give a glimpse of the social history of Manipur. Mangoljao (1970) also studied the emergence and influence of English education to the social life in Manipur.

There is a close affinity between the ELT scenario in India and that of Manipur. Manipuri society, at large, is also a multicultural and multilingual one. In such a complex situation, there arises a need for a common link that can bridge up all the differences. Though Manipuri is the *lingua franca* in Manipur, several communities' attitudes towards this language is the matter that is to be taken into account. Moreover, the question of common link language is not socially neutral. In a multiple linguistic set up like ours, there is always a possibility of having linguistic tension. Therefore, the analysis of the complex problems concerning society, language and teaching and learning of languages in a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic society like Manipur have great theoretical importance in addition to its practical implications.

Methodology of the research:

To provide and assess the profile of the ELT scenario, highlight the position, problems and prospects of English, the needs, attitudes, social variability and motivation of the users of English in Manipur, a comprehensive survey was conducted. The assessment was done on the basis of the analysis of questionnaire responses. The respondents of the said survey comprised of the students who were undergoing their study in some schools, colleges and Manipur University, all located in Imphal valley. A limitation of the study is that a large number of other students who were undergoing study in various institutions in the remote and hill areas could not be covered up due to the constraints of time, resources and accessibility. However, the participants comprised of students from different communities, having different linguistic background. The study focused on the responses of the students of various institutions, which might be considered as representative sample

¹ Sanamahi laining refers to the indigenous peoples' religious belief and practice prevalent since time immemorial. With the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur in the 18th century, it has been affected a lot. Still a large section of the population follows this cultural and religious belief and practice in the state.

since the students of these institutions belonged to different socio-economic, socio-cultural and ethnic background.

A sample of four hundred respondents of both sexes, of varying ages and educational qualifications were chosen randomly. The respondents either have studied in English-medium public schools or have studied English as a subject since their childhood. They were all bilinguals or multilinguals. They were asked to complete a questionnaire list, which was adapted from Agnihotri and Khanna (1997) with some modifications. They were also asked to give critical comments on certain descriptive questions. The questionnaires were based on certain hypotheses. Hypotheses, contrary to popular belief, are not supposed to lead to conclusions, which cannot be tested further. Keeping these in mind, the questionnaires were also based on certain hypothetical statements and questions.

Confirming or rejecting research hypotheses is always conditional or qualified, since it must always be opened to falsification. Based on the given above hypotheses, the responses of the participants were taken into account to prepare an objective data. In order to assess differences of opinion, depending on age factor, educational background, social variability and the family background, the respondents were divided into three categories based on different age groups. Altogether 400 respondents' responses (32 Research scholars, 140 Postgraduates, 156 Undergraduates and 72 up to class XII level students) were recorded for sample analysis.

Findings and Discussion:

Sociolinguistic and Socio-psychological factors behind learning English in Manipur:

The study of language attitudes is a complex phenomenon (Saville -Taroikel, 1989; Baker, 1992 and Williams, 1999) originated in social psychology as a discipline. The issue of language attitudes has become important particularly in view of the regular formation and growth of multilingual societies. The individuals are under constant pressure to learn more than one language because of pragmatic/cultural/political reasons. The languages in such situations often generate linguistic controversies about the relevance and/or primary or supremacy of one language over others. The individuals undergoing the process of socialization develop positive, negative or mixed attitudes toward one or more languages. However, more interesting are the cases of contradictory positions of condemning a language in which one has acquired or has a desire to acquire a very high level of proficiency. For example, an Antiguan-American writer, Jamaica Kincaid (1988) indicts the colonial rule and English as an instrument of colonization: "Isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed..."

On the other hand, it is possible that individuals, in spite of their positive attitudes toward a language, make no effort to acquire proficiency in that language because the target language lacks social or instrumental value. Some people wish to relate themselves to their culture, roots and people but at the same time do not want to be left behind in the race of achieving economic benefits, social prestige and positions of power. The relationship between language attitudes and power is an important socio-linguistic issue (Fishman, 1971; Pennycook, 1994; Annamalai, 2001 etc.).

Another area of great interest is where a language holds social as well as instrumental value and people wish to gain proficiency in it but cannot fulfill their wish because of their socio-economic background, improper training and learning and living environment. In these situations, individuals make decisions about which language to learn and use. They must choose between the opportunity to gain social mobility and prestige by adopting the language of power and dominance or to maintain the ethnic identity by preserving their own language. Many people develop ambivalent language attitudes under cultural, pragmatic, and socio-economic pressures. And such a linguistic situation exists in Manipur. Every literate Manipuri by default is

multilingual, because he has to learn Manipuri or a tribal dialect as the mother tongue, Hindi as the national language and English as the link language.

The linguistic behaviour of Manipuri speakers of English is rather complicated. They have a strong tendency to preserve and develop their own culture and language, and in the meantime, they want to participate in the current trend by encouraging the young generation to have greater exposure in the sphere of education. The following are some of the factors that influence the young learners in Manipur, affecting their language behaviour and to have a positive attitude towards English and a strong desire to learn it.

Parents' educational background:

Parents' education plays a very important role in shaping the attitudes and developing the abilities of their children. The children of the educated parents benefited from the awareness, access, encouragement, knowledge and economic conditions of their parents. The available data shows that the parents of the students who studied in expensive English medium schools have higher educational qualification than those of the students who studied in government schools where the medium of instruction is generally regional language. In the respondents' data, it was found that 252 members of the family are UGs, 86 PGs, 14 M.Phils and 24 Ph.Ds. The children of these parents got all sorts of support system in learning English language inside and outside the school premises. The parents also did not want to deprive their children from having all sorts opportunities associated with the mastery of this language. Having experienced already, the parents tried to provide every possible help to their children in this area.

Parents' occupation and income:

The occupation of parents is an important determiner of the socioeconomic status of one's family. Some professions provide economic security and social prestige while others are more demanding but less lucrative, and of less social prestige. Some professions enable parents to provide greater financial support and attention to the education of their children. For instance, the parents in the government jobs have financial stability and therefore, they can plan and finance for the education of their children as well as they can spare more time to guide them since these parents have financial security and fixed working hours.

However, agriculture and allied occupations are less lucrative and demand more hard work. The people whose full time occupation is agriculture are illiterate or less educated. The parents who are engaged in private establishments have no fixed working hours and in general, they have no higher income. The children of such parents are in disadvantageous position. Thus, the occupation and income of the parents is an important determinant of the nature of their children's higher education. It has been found in the data that more than 160 members of them had government jobs and 140 members of them had handsome regular monthly income. The children of these families had an advantageous position over the other children. Hence, these parents can support their wards better than the low income ones.

Previous linguistic skills of parents:

Linguistic skills in different language indicate one's educational and social position. In fact, skills in some language are acquired as a commodity. These skills can also be marketed as a pride possession. The linguistic skills in more than one languages mark individuals as educated persons. The children of such parents are benefited from them in achieving high level of linguistic skills. The parents also can influence their children to acquire these skills. Thus, the level of linguistic skills of a student and his parents is also an indicator of one's socio-economic background and a motivating factor in language learning.

Previous educational background of the learners:

The previous education of a student plays an important role in his choice for a language for higher education. It includes the medium of instruction, the location and the educational standard of the school one attended. The location of a school in terms of urban and rural area is an indicator of the availability or lack of proper facilities at the school. The children and the parents whose upbringing is in the urban milieu have greater motivation and awareness of learning the target language.

Medium of instruction:

It can be stated here that if people recommend a language as more suitable than the other languages for the medium of instruction at different stages of education, it conveys their attitude toward the language(s) under consideration and the relevance of the recommended language for the people because of various reasons. For example, if the mother tongue of a community is recommended as the medium, it is because education is more easily acquired through the mother tongue and people held their mother tongue in high esteem. Nevertheless, if a language other than the mother tongue of a community is used as the medium of instruction, it is because that the language is perceived to have instrumental value. The study indicates that a great majority of respondents recommended English as the medium of instruction at higher level of study. However, the views about the medium of instruction at school level were divided. The respondents were aware of the instrumental value of learning English and hence, they left no stone unturned to acquire and master the language skills in the said language.

Motivational orientation:

Motivation is generally considered to have an important role in language learning. Revising their previous thesis of positive attitudes and success in second language acquisition, Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorized motivational orientation as integrative, instrumental, resentment and manipulative. They found that the instrumental motivation also played a significant role in second language acquisition. When a learner perceives that the target language is an instrument of doing things, the motivation is said to be *instrumental*. *Integrative* motivation is concerned with a person's desire to be the part of the target linguistic community. The motivation is identified as *resentment* when someone learns the target language under various kinds of pressure and it is *manipulative* if target language is learnt with the aim of using it to manipulate a situation.

Agnihotri and Khanna (1982, 1997) have argued that all types of motivational orientation introduced and advocated by Gardner and Lambert do not obtain in India in the context of learning English as a second language. They point out that in India, "People learn English for a variety of reasons but all of them have unmistakable instrumental colour; some are integratively instrumental, some instrumentally integrative and some instrumental despite resentment" (Agnihotri and Khanna, 1997:83). It is possible to elaborate it further and add two more categories of *environment-adaptive* motivation and *self-improvement* motivation, which, in some way, may be viewed as instrumental. When someone learns the target language to earn the appreciation of the people and to add it as an attraction to his personality, it may be described as *environment-adaptive* motivation.

The motivational orientation is *self-improvement* if an individual learns the target language at the higher level of education to improve his skills in that language. Thus, the languages are learnt for a variety of intermixed reasons and the situation is more complicated when it is pursued for higher academic study. But an important point to note is that the instrumental motivation is the most prominent when someone studies a language for a higher degree and it is irrespective of whether the language is mother tongue, second language or a foreign language. Agnihotri and Khanna (1997-85) rightly said, "English is perceived not only as an academic and economic ladder, it is also seen as a means for enhancing social mobility and individual personality."

The motivation that obtains in learning English in Manipur is not singular. It is the preferred language for higher studies, primarily because of instrumental and environment-adaptive motivation. However, comparatively, the instrumental motivation is oriented more towards economic and professional aspects of life than social aspects. Getting more jobs and achieving success in profession were the most important reasons for the respondents to improve listening/ speaking/ reading/ writing skills in English. Almost 66.6% respondents believed that the proficiency acquired in the said language acknowledged one's prestige and personality. It is also considered indispensable because the proficiency in it enabled the learners to interact with more and varied people. It is an effective language for scientific studies and research works. Every educated Manipuris have felt the importance of this language.

In the present circumstances, and with the present language and education policies, opposition to teaching / learning English as a subject may only deprive the underprivileged from the power of a language that has so high instrumental as well as environment-adaptive motivation to its learners. It may only widen the gap between those who know English and those who do not know it. In our current social scenario, the language policy and socio-economic environment being favourable to English as a second language give it the status of an indispensable asset worth-possessing. In addition, because of these factors, the language has immense prospect of development in this part of the country.

Conclusion and implications:

It is certain that the learner is a member of a community that has certain views about the purpose of teaching and learning languages and the role that language teaching fulfills in the general system of education. These views are a reflection of the attitudes the community adopts towards the language being taught. The implication of these attitudes and views can be far-reaching. For instance, if a language is a second language in the students' own community, it has a clear practical use in everyday life and the students will be aware of this. Similarly, if the learner knows that he is learning an international *lingua franca*, he will see its practical relevance for his future life, and more general question concerning the educational and literary value of the language will be seen less important. It is right that the social and economic needs of the community should exert the most powerful influence on shaping the content and methodology of language teaching courses, and in this connection, it is interesting to see how English teaching enterprises, ELT materials and methodology, motivation and parental outlook to this language in Manipur are gradually being transformed.

Moreover, languages in a multilingual and multiethnic setting form a system network. Each language in this network has a function-determined value of the other languages. A society or a government can assign a new value to any one of the languages in the system network in terms of its own policy of language planning, but the society or government must realize that this assignment of a new value to a language will produce a chain reaction in the network. The values of the other language in the network are bound to undergo changes as well. Moreover, effective bilingualism or multilingualism is a powerful way of enriching the linguistic repertoire of individuals. These resources offered by plurality of languages can be used for rapid social and economic changes and modernization programmes.

Generally, the learners of English in Manipur are mostly bilinguals or even multilingual. English language to them is a second language after their respective mother tongues. In their other ordinary walks of life, among their respective communities, they may carry out their day-to-day transactions through regional languages or mother tongues. But when the question of *contact with the outsiders* arise, they have to render this task in a common link language and that language is not any other region-specific languages but English, because it's sphere is not limited to any particular community. In addition, it is not possible for anyone to know so many existing languages at a time for maintaining contacts. Moreover, by learning English, most of the learners are looking for better prospects in their future life. Its knowledge gives them a platform to deal with the competitive world. For most people, the importance of English is closely associated with its prestige and

instrumental value in society. It contains the key, they felt, not only to higher education, better job prospects and upward social mobility, but also to all knowledge and power. The lack of knowledge in the language appeared to be associated with backwardness. It is only the linguists, who feel that English is not the road to upward social mobility. For the public, English, obviously, is a key to mingle with the current trends. People send their children to English medium schools so that they can compete in the competition market. They are compelled to send their children to English medium schools because they will lag behind in their career if they study in the regional language medium schools. In Manipur, Manipuri (Meiteilon) is the state official language, but all official transactions and important documents in black and white are carried out/ written/ printed in English. It is more easily acceptable anywhere, in any community. Hence, it can be mentioned that English language plays a more important and valuable role.

In a multilingual interaction, no single language caters to all the needs of the particular languages and they are rather determined by: (i) pragmatic demands of the situation and (ii) the institutional factors of identification. For instance, in a way, the use of English language in post-colonial India reflects the pragmatic approach of the nation's capacity to accept and make a language as foreign as English so utterly her own. It becomes so evident from our transactions in academic, technological, commercial and administrative sectors, and also in the mass media, tourism and entertainment circles and among the urban youth. Today the penetration of English in a variety of domains has begun to sink roots in the Indian soil. Moreover, Indian English is getting further detached from native English speakers.

With the growing of literacy, urbanity and technological advancement, the scope and intensity of communication in English for inter-group and intra-group contact is getting radically transformed. Today the urban milieu provided more opportunities than before for Manipuris to interact with people of other states through a smattering of English or by a frequent shift from an Indian language to English or vice versa. There has been a glaring proliferation of English seeping through the upper crust of the society to the middle class and further down to the grassroots level, particularly in urban settings. Today there is a large number of teachers of English, and students learning English, a stronger English press and a powerful English media. It is different from the situation where the British left the region nearly seventy years back.

In case of Manipur, the emergence of English is associated with the introduction of modern system of education. At this juncture the whole educational system in general and language teaching/learning enterprises in the state in particular takes a new shape and this new model is quite different from that of indigenous pre-British annexation state of education in Manipur. Earlier, the Manipuris looked askance at the English education. They feared that the introduction of English education in Manipur would lead to the curtailment of their freedom and rights. They refused to take any kind of assistance given by the Englishmen to start English education. Many parents looked down upon those children going to the English schools established afterwards.

However, as the days had gone by, circumstances changed. The number of European visitors to Manipur also increased by leaps and bounds. The deep feeling of untouchable slowly disappeared. Side by side, the English missionaries become active in every nook and corner of Manipur and they made people aware of the necessity of learning English language and getting English education. There is no looking back since then. English education (which was once treated reluctantly) becomes today the most desirable and promising avenue for preparing a better career. Nowadays, every parent prefers to send their children to expensive well-organized English medium schools than cheap government owned institutions. The privately owned English medium schools increases and it seems to have a mushroom growth in the state. With the introduction of English education, certain new avenues are opened and our society even could maintain a close link with the current trends, becoming a part and parcel of the global villa. Whether it is in the field of education, information technology, science, medicine, trade and commerce, administration etc., certain changes are taking place. The credit of this modernizing process goes to English education. The burning question before all of us is whether we can compromise this progress in the name of preserving our culture and tradition.

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