



# Mother Tongue versus English: Language Conundrum and the School Curriculum

Sangeeta Goswami, 2Dr Jagat Swargiary

1Research Scholar, 2Professor Of Education

1Gauhati University,

2Gauhati University

## Abstract

*Beginning with the issue of the importance of the mother tongue in the matter of identity assertion of a linguistic community across different cultures and civilization this paper goes on to argue that despite the colossal need to preserve and promote the mother tongue of any linguistic community the significance of English in a multilingual and multiethnic country like India too is immense. The paper then discusses the kind of hurdles and hindrances caused by the negligence of English in the School curriculum, especially in the context of the pursuit of higher knowledge across various disciplines. It also takes up for discussion relevant excerpts from the National Educational Policy 2020 concerning the language policy and the learning of English in school. The paper concludes by advocating the retention of English as a compulsory subject at the secondary level in the curriculum under SEBA .*

**Keywords:** English, mother tongue, home language, national education policy, teaching, learning

In that intensely poignant story “The Last Lesson,” by Alphonse Daudet the schoolmaster, M. Hamel of the village school in Alsace asks the class on the day of his last French lesson, ‘How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and you can neither speak nor write your own language?’ He goes on to add, ‘... when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language, it is as if they had the key to their prison’. The kind of misery and distress of the teacher, the students and all those villagers who happened to attend the last French lesson at having to sacrifice the right to learn their native language even before they had actually learnt anything of it in favour of the language of the alien conquerors finds a powerfully touching expression in the story. But the love for the motherland and her language is not only native to the French alone but to all humanity at large. Language, we understand, is the most effective vehicle for not only expressing our feelings,

thoughts, ideas and emotions but it is also the most powerful instrument for the assertion of identity of various nationalities and linguistic communities. It is in fact, the only instrument capable of uniting different sections of people cutting across the barriers of caste, creed or religion into one common pursuit of linguistic identity. It follows, therefore, that the fear of losing a community's linguistic identity should be inextricably caught up with the fear of its total extinction, especially when the community in question happens to be a small one, and so, by the virtue of its size is relegated to an inferior status in the political hierarchy. Consequently, the issue of mother tongue is germane to any discourse relating to identity assertion across all cultures and civilizations. And when it comes to India owing to the nature and structure of the complex and immense variety of her multiethnic and multilingual societies, language comes to play a crucial role in the politics of identity assertion. It has also been observed in the case of such states that the bigger linguistic groups often tend to dominate the smaller ones jeopardizing in the process, the latter's prospects of survival as a race at all. It has been observed that in most cases the largest linguistic community in a state seeks to use language to assert its cultural and political hegemony in a way that the smaller communities find themselves threatened and are forced into a situation where the only option left for them is to resort to movements for the sake of retaining their linguistic identity. This has also been for long, the issue with the state of Assam with its diverse groups of language users over and over again.

However, in spite of the this long deliberation in favour of the mother tongue, the purpose of this paper is actually not so much to underline the significance of the mother tongue itself as to underscore the importance of learning English even when the respect for one's cultural and linguistic identity should remain singularly paramount. It is in the interest of the growth and development of the mother tongue that the pursuit of English becomes imperative for students in any part of India owing basically to the nation's multi-linguistic framework. It is of course a welcome step on the part of the framers of the National Education Policy 2020 to lay emphasis on education through vernacular medium in the lower classes. Similarly, the stress on Multilingualism and the power of language is sure to yield far reaching benefits. For instance, article 4.11 of the New Education Policy states:

It is well understood that young children learn and grasp nontrivial concepts more quickly in their home language/mother tongue. Home language is usually the same language as the mother tongue or that which is spoken by local communities. However, at times in multi-lingual families, there can be a home language spoken by other family members which may sometimes be different from mother tongue or local language. Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language. Thereafter, the home/local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools. High-quality textbooks, including in science, will be made available in home languages/mother tongue. All efforts will be made early on to ensure that any gaps that exist between the language spoken by the child and the medium of teaching are bridged. In cases where home language/mother tongue textbook material is not available, the

language of transaction between teachers and students will still remain the home language/mother tongue wherever possible. Teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction. All languages will be taught with high quality to all students; a language does not need to be the medium of instruction for it to be taught and learned well. (4.11 NEP 2020).

Excellent! The effort to impart knowledge through mother tongue or the home language, which, may not necessarily be the mother tongue, is certainly powered with noble intentions. This is well acceptable up to a certain grade. Grade 5 as envisaged, should be reasonably okay. But to carry it up to Grade 8 and beyond may not always be a beneficial move unless there is a compulsory thrust for learning English. There is not a single reference in the policy at least up to this point about the necessity of including English as a compulsory subject in the syllabus. It is all very fine to acquire knowledge of things and phenomena in one's mother tongue or home language as the case may be. But as things stand in a multi-lingual country like India where a native speaker of Tamil cannot converse with a Marathi or vice-versa in any other Indian language but is forced to take recourse to English, the fact of non exposure to English of a native speaker of any Indian Language is most likely to create impediments on the way to achieving higher learning. Again, keeping in view the ability of children between the ages of 2 and 8 to pick up languages the policy states:

As research clearly shows that children pick up languages extremely quickly between the ages of 2 and 8 and that multilingualism has great cognitive benefits to young students, children will be exposed to different languages early on (but with a particular emphasis on the mother tongue), starting from the Foundational Stage onwards. All languages will be taught in an enjoyable and interactive style, with plenty of interactive conversation, and with early reading and subsequently writing in the mother tongue in the early years, and with skills developed for reading and writing in other languages in Grade 3 and beyond. There will be a major effort from both the Central and State governments to invest in large numbers of language teachers in all regional languages around the country, and, in particular, for all languages mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. States, especially States from different regions of India, may enter into bilateral agreements to hire teachers in large numbers from each other, to satisfy the three-language formula in their respective States, and also to encourage the study of Indian languages across the country. Extensive use of technology will be made for teaching and learning of different languages and to popularize language learning. (4.12. NEP 2020)

This is certainly going to be a most laudatory initiative for the growth and development of all state languages of the country. If implemented in the true spirit of the policy the local languages are certainly going to reap great harvest in terms of their stay and proliferation. Children too would learn their stuff in the ease and comfort of the mother tongue. But, once again, sans the knowledge of English there would certainly be hurdles and hindrances on the way and the journey ahead may not be as smooth as in terms anticipated. For,

however much the Indian languages might flourish, there is no gainsaying the fact that owing to the variegated linguistic structure of the nation itself, the individual states can ill afford to dispense with the continuation of English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum.

Next, coming to the three- language formula as projected by the NEP 2020, it is the same attitude of nonchalance that we witness towards the introduction of English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum.

The three-language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping in mind the Constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions, and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity. However, there will be a greater flexibility in the three-language formula, and no language will be imposed on any State. The three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India. In particular, students who wish to change one or more of the three languages they are studying may do so in Grade 6 or 7, as long as they are able to demonstrate basic proficiency in three languages (including one language of India at the literature level) by the end of secondary school. (4.13. NEP 2020)

The idea of implementing the three-language formula with a view to promoting multilingualism for the sake of national unity is brilliant and marked with promise and potential for positive benefits. The idea too of students being “able to demonstrate basic proficiency in three languages (including one language of India at the literature level) by the end of secondary school” sounds perfect. But, there again, lies the rub. For the option to select any three languages may not include English. And this freedom from English might eventually land up such students into abysmal problems once they move out of their local comfort zones to other places for pursuing higher studies where none of the languages learnt by them may be of any use in the new circumstances. This is where English comes to rescue. The policy of course, states that

All efforts will be made in preparing high-quality bilingual textbooks and teaching-learning materials for science and mathematics, so that students are enabled to think and speak about the two subjects both in their home language/mother tongue and in English. (4.14)

But, this does not answer the question relating to the learning of English as a compulsory subject. For in spite of the option being there for learning the texts in English those educated through mother tongue or home language would prefer to remain within their comfort zone insofar as the issue of understanding and comprehension is concerned. Consequently, such emphasis on the vernacular medium will not do for especially, the senior classes. As has been already stated the study of the English language in any Indian state becomes incumbent upon learners owing primarily to the nation’s multi-linguistic structure. As T. C. Baruah observes “ English however must continue to be studied... Our students who are undergoing training at schools which will admit them either to university or vocation must acquire sufficient mastery of English to give them access to the treasures of knowledge, and in the universities no student should be allowed to take a degree who does not acquire the ability

to read with facility and understanding the works of English authors”. (Baruah, 1985. p 6 ). It does not take much effort to take cognizance of the fact that whatever be the sphere of study – humanities, science, commerce, social science, management, business studies, law, archeology, machine learning, artificial intelligence, environmental science, earth science, life science et al – it is well nigh impossible to pursue any of these branches of studies sans a sound knowledge of the English language. Proper knowledge of English has become mandatory on the part of all and sundry with minimum interest in the affairs of human activity worth the name. There is no escape from English should we but think of achieving anything in the civilized spheres of life and conduct. For English is one language today that is used for disseminating knowledge throughout the globe in the largest quantity. And with the impact of globalization being felt at every level of our existence today the need for inter-group communication among nations has only increased manifold thereby underlining the importance of recognizing English as an international language. Under the circumstances we feel that English should continue to remain a compulsory subject in the secondary level of school education, if not at the earlier stages in all schools, private or public in Assam under the Board of Secondary Education, Assam (SEBA). Whatever be the structure or pattern of secondary classes under the NEP 2020 the compulsory status of English in the curriculum should not be disturbed under any circumstances. At the same time it is also absolutely imperative that all the concomitant features associated with the teaching-learning process of English be adequately comprehended and made functional.

One of the factors that strikes us as vital to the success of learning of English in the most effective way is the teacher. In the context of the kind of learning Indian students are used to, the teacher obviously plays a seminal role in exposing students to the world of knowledge at large, whatever be the subject or discipline being pursued. In fact, the teacher happens to be a key factor in the teaching-learning process. And a veritable instance of this cannot be any other subject but English when it comes to the question of teaching the language in the vernacular medium schools of almost all regions of the country. However for the purpose of our discussion we should like to adhere to the schools of Assam only.

It is rather unfortunate that despite the appointment of teachers specifically for the purpose of teaching English in the secondary classes of Assam there has been a high rate of failure in English year after year in the secondary examination conducted by SEBA. All the same, there are also instances of students doing exceptionally well in all other subjects but barely managing to secure pass marks in English. It is pathetic to watch students who are otherwise reasonably brilliant failing to perform in expected lines in higher classes only because of their inability to comprehend the texts written in English in subjects other than English literature as well. This is the result of not receiving adequate training in English at the secondary level itself or at early stages. In other words, teachers entrusted with the job fail to deliver in the way expected of them. Of course, it won't be wise to put the blame universally on the teachers themselves as there are forces too at work to inhibit the initiative and efforts of teachers wherever they are forthcoming. And one of the major causes impeding the enthusiasm of teachers to deliver is the practice of promoting students to higher classes even when their

performance in the examination is miserably dismal. Nothing could be more discouraging for the sincere teacher to witness his students behaving irresponsibly or not paying any heed to what is being taught in the class merely because of their tacit realization that marks actually do not matter for them to get promoted as there is always the provision for grace and consolation. Nor are the parents and guardians of such students of vernacular medium schools, in most cases, responsible enough to make their wards realize the importance of being sincere in class and the necessity of following up at home what has been done in the classroom. It is this attitude of nonchalance on the part of students and guardians that most affects the teaching and learning process of English as it is a foreign language without any kind of similarity of relationship with the mother tongue. So much for the irresponsibility of learners.

As for the role of teachers, it needs to be appreciated that it is the translation of the teacher's thought into action which determines the pedagogical practices as evident in the classroom, the truth of which has been so effectively elaborated by Jackson in his classic work *Life in Classrooms*. Researches conducted worldwide too wax eloquent on the role of teachers in influencing the system. True, the teacher is constrained to work under the external machinery of "givens" like the school and the classroom, the physical resources, the teaching time available, the instructional objectives, the textbooks, the examination system, etc. It is indeed a tall order to make any significant mark by remaining within the confines of these givens and yet do something extraordinary to attract students. Yet notwithstanding the problematic of "givens," the teacher is expected to perform and deliver.

Under the circumstances, it is eventually the personality and the teaching acumen of the teacher that carries the day. R.L Mehta, for instance, would have us believe that "A teacher with the qualities of the imagination, invention and ability to secure and maintain pupils' interest will find something to stimulate him, but those who come to teaching as a last resort, will find himself blackballed again and again". (Mehta, 1950.p 357) On his shoulders, therefore, rests the onus of orchestrating success for the learners by using the kind of tools and weapons at his disposal. And what could be these tools and weapons? First and foremost, it is the capacity to think out of the box. The teacher, in other words, needs the courage and confidence to go beyond the lecture and text books and formulate such means as would immediately attract the attention of the students. He has to prove himself as different from the run of the mill kind of teachers. For this he may divide the class into groups and organize inter group competitions of different kinds so that the students enjoy and learn at the same time. These competitions could range from story-telling to debating and mock parliament, quiz sessions to interviews and group discussions. On occasions they may even be taken out for watching movies and on returning to the classroom be asked to narrate their experiences of the movie watched by them. Similarly, students and teachers together may stage English plays also. These activities are sure to create a positive impact on the entire teaching-learning process of English. But under no circumstances should they be allowed to talk in any other language but English. But while doing this the teacher should take care to see that every student participates. For, in the words of H.E. Palmer "Language learning is a habit forming process and constant and accurate practice is the basis of habit formation". (Palmer, Redman.

1968.p39).

No one should also be allowed to make fun of the shortcomings of any student. It is up to the teacher to create an atmosphere of warmth and trust so that every student feels confident about communicating in English. The teacher may also use Communicative Teaching Method in addition to the Grammar and Translation Method being so rampantly used in all campuses across the state. Moreover as Kohli remarks “ ... this method has its own disadvantages. Firstly, it is an unnatural method, which does not follow the natural order of learning a language viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing”. (Kohli 1988. pp 40-41) .

Next, the teacher must be resourceful enough to procure from whatever source, government or otherwise, as much audio visuals as possible to turn the classroom into a place of academically oriented entertainment zone in a way that students begin to miss the classroom whenever they are forced by circumstances to stay away from school. But while doing all this care must be taken to complete the regular lessons on time in an atmosphere of cordial motivation and spontaneous response. Lessons ought to be so imparted both within the available infrastructure and innovative practices that all the four skills like speaking, listening, reading and writing are equally emphasized and effectively pursued. More importantly, all teachers involved in the act of teaching English should strictly follow the practice of making lesson plans and adhere to the last syllable of the plan with utmost dedication.

All teacher training programs conducted by such bodies as SCERT, RUSA, Asom Sarba Siksha Abhijan, SEBA etc too should be made available to the teachers by the authorities concerned. Similarly, the benefits of Orientation programs, Refresher Courses, Master Trainers in English program should all be extended to teachers of English in right earnest. The teachers too, on their part, should attend these programs with all sincerity of purpose and integrity so that they may eventually put the benefits derived by them to their effective best by carrying the same to their respective classrooms.

Finally, all schools should arrange for Parent- Teachers' Meeting at regular intervals so as to monitor the progress of the students and discuss threadbare the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as applicable to all stakeholders.

If all the aspects discussed above are attended to in the right spirit and perspective there is no reason why students of vernacular medium students should not be able to learn English in ways desired. What is important is the sincere effort of all stakeholders --- students, teachers, parents and authorities – to make the process of teaching-learning of English successful. It is most imperative that each of the stakeholders takes cognizance of the manifold advantages of learning English for each student.

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