

Coming Full Circle—India’s English Revolution

Abstract

The English language is spoken by 1 in 7 people around the world. Globally, it is the dominant language of trade, industry, and commerce, and it has been adopted as *lingua franca* by nations around the world. This paper briefly describes the rise of English as a global language and its usage by native, ESL, and EFL speakers. The paper has been written on the premise that ESL speakers usually have a better grasp over English grammar and usage, more so than native speakers. The paper then discusses India’s introduction to the English language by Britain. India’s rise as an ESL country with near-native English proficiency has been discussed, emphasizing its educational system and the special status granted to English by its government. Finally, it outlines India’s emerging role as a country providing value-added, language-based service exports to native English-speaking countries like Britain. These exports have brought the English cycle in India full circle.

Humble Beginnings—How English Became a Global Language

Up until the 16th century, English was largely spoken only in England, southern Scotland, and small areas of Wales and Ireland, with just about 2-3 million people worldwide speaking it as their native tongue. Cut to 2005. According to a British Council estimate, that number would increase to about 5 billion by 2015—that’s nearly half the world’s population. Already, 1 in 7 people around the world speaks English either as a native language or as a second language. To be more specific, globally, about 400 million people are native speakers of English, and an almost equal number use it as a second language. Braj Kachru, professor of linguistics and author of numerous books on English, has referred to these two groups of speakers as the “Inner Circle” (native speakers of English) and the “Outer Circle” (second language speakers of English). (Kachru also defined a third group of English learners—those learning it as a foreign language—a group he referred to as the “Expanding Circle.”) These terms are clearly indicative of the elite status of English, suggesting that those who speak it as a native tongue belong to a niche “inner circle.” This is most likely true, considering the fact that English has been accorded the status of *lingua franca*—a language adopted by speakers of various languages from all over the world as their common means of communication.

According to eminent British linguist David Crystal, in the next 50 years, there will be twice as many people in countries where English is a second language (e.g., India, Singapore) than in countries where it is the first (e.g., Britain, America). Therefore, today, for the first time in the history of the English language, the Outer Circle is on the verge of out-sizing the Inner one.

Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) are not only growing in number but they can also be credited with having the best understanding of the language, even more so than members of the Inner Circle. The basis of this startling claim is that Inner Circle members are raised in a completely English-speaking environment, where they primarily learn the language through osmosis. The downside is that due to this “acquired” English, they may be able to speak it well

instinctively but do not always have a thorough knowledge of its fundamental grammatical and linguistic components. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, or members of the Expanding Circle, are taught English in their schools and universities as a subject, just like science or math. Their English is therefore more learned than acquired or absorbed, because of which they have a conceptual understanding of the language but often fail in the execution (speaking or writing correctly). It is the ESL learners, the ones in between, who have the dual benefit of learning English in a scholastic environment as well as absorbing it in an English-infused environment. They are therefore easily able to supplement their aptitude for English with a critical understanding of its syntax and grammar.

Enter, India!—India’s Emergence as an ESL Country with “Native” Proficiency

One of the forerunners of this growing Outer Circle is India. With a population of 1 billion, and close to one-third of that number using English as a means of communication in all spheres of life, India is undoubtedly edging its way into the Inner Circle. In his presidential address to the English Association in London in 1975, George Steiner, author and visiting professor at Yale, Harvard, and Oxford, observed that “the linguistic center of English has shifted” to ESL countries such as India, South Africa, and Sri Lanka.

India owes this rising linguistic status to a sound educational system, which, in turn, it largely owes to the British rule. India was a British colony for over 200 years, during which reformers such as British Parliamentarian Lord McCauley established an English-based educational system in the country that continues to turn out flawless English speakers and writers to this day.

Lord McCauley’s educational system has been adapted and amended over the subsequent decades. What has remained unchanged, however, is the fact that the Indian educational system continues to promote the teaching theory of “immersion,” wherein all subjects are taught in the English language itself, right from the elementary level. The country is also spending more on its education every year—in 2001-02, India spent 4.02% of its GDP on education, as opposed to less than 1% in 1951-52 (soon after India’s independence from British rule in 1947). English has been granted a special status by the national government, according to which it is the language for official purposes such as legal, financial, and medical systems, and it is also the major language used in Parliament. Competitive exams for the civil services and engineering are held in English; the country also publishes almost 3,000 English newspapers.

America too has had a major influence on India’s English usage. English has percolated down to India’s grassroots such that even the uneducated masses are able to understand, if not speak, English, due to the rising influence of an Americanized mass media. An open national economy has welcomed English through such unlikely mediums as branded clothing, American television programming, American fast food, and movies

America and Britain, both of which have made significant contributions to English in India, each have their own particular styles of using the language. American English is vastly different from British English in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation; consequently, India has imbibed both styles. While the English

of most Indian publications (novels, newspapers, textbooks) is strictly British, American English is employed in the growing number of American call centers, multinational companies (MNCs), and by the rising number of Indian students studying in American universities. (In 2003, 11.6% of international students studying at American campuses were Indian, outnumbering students from any other country.)

However, a language can be considered as truly ingrained in a nation's collective consciousness when it is not just used for functional purposes, such as those detailed above, but when it becomes a medium for creative and artistic expression. The corpus of Indian literature has grown so tremendously that "Indian Writing in English" is now a genre as accepted in literary circles as "post-colonial literature," "Romanticism," and "the Beat Generation." Contemporary Indian writers have won some of the most prestigious literary awards including the Nobel (VS Naipaul), the Pulitzer (Jhumpa Lahiri), and the Booker (Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie). What is most noteworthy is that while most ESL countries produce literature in their native tongue, which is subsequently translated, the success of Indian writers has been achieved by writing in English.

A Language Revolution—India's Language Exports

After a language revolution on its own shores, today India is engaging in language exports to other countries. The export of talent in India began with IT professionals and moved on to call centers. India is a globally acknowledged IT world leader. With nearly 80% of all web content appearing in English, it is not surprising that India is home to a large work force that is proficient and comfortable with conversing, writing, and even programming computers in English. Today, outsourcing is becoming increasingly language-based. Services such as content development, technical writing, professional editing, and transcription have gained momentum in India, and this is only a scratch on the surface.

Another ironical development is that American and British schools are now actively inviting Indian teachers to teach their "Inner Circle" children English! The governments of America and Britain, the two largest countries speaking English as a first language, have launched scholarships and exchange programs that export English teachers from India. In Britain, the land that introduced English to India, there exist as many as 7,000 vacancies for English teachers, according to government officials. The National Union of Teachers predicts the figure may go up to as many as 40,000. A large number of these vacancies are being filled by Indian teachers; Indian recruitment agencies around the country are securing positions for hundreds of English teachers from India every year. Satish Y. Deodhar, assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, has noted that nearly 10,000 secondary school teachers are currently working outside the country, and the demand for Indian teachers is only on the rise.

It was Britain that brought the English language to India. However, with the Outer Circle now teaching English to members of the Inner Circle, India's language revolution has certainly come full circle!

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