

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

Amarnath Jha

*Prof Amarnath Jha (1897-1955), Padma Vibhushan award winner was born in Madhubani in Bihar. An artist in words, he was known among the educationists and students for his erudition and command of English language. Prof Jha's writing is always noted for beauty of language and ease of expression. His style is reminiscent of the great poets and prose writers in English literature throughout the ages. Prof Jha held several academic posts such as the Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University as well as Banaras Hindu University. He was the Chariman of Bihar Public Service Commission and Maithili Sahitya Parishad. Besides English, he had good command over Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, Bangla, and Maithili. The present piece **The Teaching of English in India**, taken from **Occasional Essays and Addresses** was first published in **Teaching** in June 1929. In this essay Prof Jha talks about the problems and ground realities of teaching of English in India.*

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- 1 English has now been taught in this country, at different stages of education, for almost a century, and it is desirable that those engaged in the task of teaching it, as well as others interested in it, should pause and ask themselves if all is well with the subject, if those who teach it are competent, if it is any longer necessary to keep it the medium of instruction, and if a distinction is not needed between the teaching of the language and the literature. I have experience only of college and university teaching, but having, passed through the school classes, and as Chairman of the English Committee of the United Provinces Board of High School and Intermediate Education, I may perhaps be permitted to refer briefly to the earlier stages of English teaching also. My observations refer especially to the provinces in north India.
- 2 In the Primary schools, English is generally very badly taught. For one thing the educational authorities have refrained from giving a proper lead, and there is much confusion of ideals. The ancient method of 'cramming' is tacitly condemned; of the

newer methods - Direct; Dalton, Montessori, and the rest - the teachers know little, and that little inaccurately. There is also a mental antagonism to what they consider 'fads'. The consequence is that the Primary school boy is the victim of incomplete and half-hearted experiments. This, however, is not the whole trouble. Ordinarily the juniormost and least qualified teacher is placed in charge of the primary classes; or else, an old teacher on the verge of superannuation. In either case, the teaching is unsatisfactory - callous, experimental, unbaked, or disillusioned, desultory, and slipshod. During his most impressionable years the boy's mind receives bad nutrition. He learns incorrect pronunciation which leads to bad spelling - 'loin' for 'lion'; 'claver' for 'clever'; 'fother' for 'father' - defects which become so much a part of his equipment that they are never eradicated. Much of what is laughed at as 'Babu English', much of what seems so tragically pathetic in the literary effusions of 'plucked B.As' can, in the last analysis, be traced to incompetent, unqualified, inexperienced teachers of primary schools. Ruskin's 'deformation' is a term that can truly be applied to the results they produce. What is needed, then, at the Primary stage, is a declared policy of the educational mandarins regarding the system of training. Then, properly trained teachers should be appointed for these classes. Indeed, I would suggest that the best teachers of the school should be selected for looking after 'the young idea'. Child psychology is a subject of which most school-master, except empirically, are totally ignorant. They should go through a course of training in phonetics: the new linguaphone ought to be of much value. Elocution is another branch of which they should know something.

3 So much for the teacher. Then most of the primers and readers prescribed for the junior school classes relate to subjects that are far removed from the life of the boys. They can take no real interest in them. Efforts should be made to bring the subject-matter of these books more in relation with the traditions and environments of Indian boys. Thus taught, English can become a subject of real interest and even enthusiasm, where it frequently is at present a dull, insipid and lifeless subject, endured only as a necessary evil.

4 English is a 'gorgon, hydra, or chimera dire' to most Indian boys, because not only is the language in itself difficult as an independent subject - and who will deny that it has numerous pitfalls for the unwary, 'shall' and 'will' and the definite article, for instance? - but also because all the other subjects are taught and examined through its medium. Examiners in history, science, and geography deduct marks frequently not because the candidate is weak in these subjects, but because he is not able to express his knowledge of these in correct English. The bewildered students' question, 'But how many teachers of science, history and geography themselves speak and write correct English?' is not entirely beside the point. What in other countries a young boy learns and expresses in

his own 'mother-tongue', he has here to acquire and state in a difficult foreign language. He finds it difficult to assimilate knowledge, and even more difficult to express it. The description of the grammar school children whom Roger Ascham knew in the north in the sixteenth century might have been written today:

5 "I remember, when I was young, in the North they went to the Grammar School little children; they came from thence great Lubbers, always learning, and little profiting; learning without Book everything, understanding within the Book little or nothing. Their whole knowledge was tied only to their Tongue and Lips, and never ascended up to the Brain and Head; and therefore was soon spit out of the mouth again."

6 The Indian boy labours hard and unceasingly, and denies to himself rest for recreation and relaxation: there is on his face always a look of strained seriousness; the shades of the prison-house close upon him in his earliest years. And yet, Max Muller said that the Indian students cannot make even a clever mistake! Exaggeration apart, it is undeniable that the burden on the boy is more than he can bear. There



are various causes – inadequate physical nourishment, entirely unsuitable school-hours, economic pressure; but one of the most important is the linguistic bondage under which he labours. It will not be very easy to free him from it; the rival claims of indigenous tongues – as numerous as in the tower of Babel – will have to be settled; text-books will have to be produced; teachers will have to familiarise themselves with technical terms in these languages. But these are all difficulties that can and should be overcome.

7 When the boy comes to the High School stage, he is able to think for himself, and to know his tastes and distastes. But there is hardly a normal, healthy, full-blooded lad to whom literature in some form or other does not make an appeal - a book of adventure, may be, or a poem, or a biography. Here, too, the great need is that of suitable selection of textbooks. They should be selected as good literature, as passports into 'the realms of gold', and not, as they frequently are, as forcing a moral down the young throats, or as teaching natural science. So long as the pieces can pass as literature - pleasant primarily, and well-written, and only incidentally instructive – they have a right to exist. Teachers, too, should teach them as literature, living, warm, and vivid. For most of the boys the parts and figures of speech, the varieties of metrical forms, scansion, and the rest can only remain the fopperies and fripperies of literature: if they are familiar with

the spirit, if they can recognise good poetry when they read it and vicious prose when they see it, the end has been achieved. I am far from despising the technical parts; they are useful and even necessary for the craftsman, and sorely will he repent ignoring them. But for the amateur who is not to live by it, what matter the tools of the trade, if he has the skill to enjoy the finished product? The sovereign method is not to alarm and frighten the aspiring student; let him see the best models and live in their company. He must be dull, indeed, and not suited for literary training if he cannot imbibe through this contact all that is worth while in literary mechanism.

8. Once a student has reached the university stage, it is for the tutor to 'educate', to develop the young man's tastes and correct them, to guide him to newer avenues of delight and inspiration, and to teach him the higher qualities of style, the intellectual and emotional analysis, the thoughtful explanation of what had hitherto been mainly a vague like or dislike. Here the student should familiarise himself with the best books, not necessarily the most famous ones, and familiarise himself so that they become not so much aids to elegant conversation or apt reference, but parts of his daily and hourly thought. Here again, the teacher can do much. The favourite method of teaching employed by the late Sir Walter Raleigh was reading aloud to his class of his favourite prose and poetical passages from the various periods of literature. Far more satisfactory than dull pages from dry-as-dust literary histories, far more impressive than set lectures on well-worn themes, this method was calculated more to arouse general interest in a large class than to guide the eager searchings of the specialist. But specialisation can be effective and useful only after a fairly comprehensive general background has been set. When that is done, what is needed is only an occasional lighting of the rush lamp at the central flame.

Let's Think and Do

1. Write a short essay on the problems of teaching – learning English in Bihar.
2. Describe your experiences of learning English at Primary and Secondary stages
3. What is 'Babu English'? Find out the reasons that give birth to 'Babu English'.
4. Describe the role of teachers and textbooks in teaching-learning English.
5. How can English become a subject of real interest?
6. What should be the role of a teacher of English at the University stage?

