

English in India: A Complex Legacy: A Brief Analysis

Praveena Marupakula

Asst Prof. of English, Tara Government College, Sangareddy

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Abstract

Stephen Krashen (1981, 1982) distinguishes two ways of language proficiency: conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. Learning involves deliberate study and instruction, while acquisition happens naturally, similar to how children pick up their first language. This paper explores English Language Teaching (ELT) in India, focusing on its historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and the shift from traditional learning methods to approaches encouraging natural acquisition. The colonial introduction of English, shaped by the East India Company and formalised through Macaulay's Minute (1835) and Wood's Despatch (1854), positioned English as a language of administration, opportunity, and social mobility. Post-independence educational reforms, including the Kothari Commission (1964–66), NEP 1986, and NEP 2020, highlighted learner-centred strategies, activity-based teaching, and integration with regional languages. The study shows that exposure to reading, listening, and speaking in meaningful contexts supports natural language development, moving beyond rote memorisation. Emphasising acquisition-focused pedagogy can improve communicative competence, reduce linguistic barriers, and align English education in India with global standards.

1. Introduction

According to the research of linguist Stephen Krashen,[1][2] humans may become proficient in a language in one of two ways: either by acquiring the language or by learning it. Language acquisition is considered a "subconscious process identical to the process children utilise when acquiring their first language." On the other hand, learning a language he described as "a conscious process that ultimately results in 'knowing about' [the rules of the] language."

There is, however, a lot less of a difference between the words in modern parlance, and they are often used interchangeably since the definitions of "learning" and "acquisition" are the same. Let us compare and contrast two widely accepted definitions:

Learning is acquiring new information or skills through experience, training, or study.

Acquisition is the learning or development of a characteristic habit or skill.

Because of these definitions, many believe that "learning" and "acquisition" are interchangeable. We need to provide new meanings to them to distinguish them from one another and restore the truth to Krashen's [3] differentiation between the two: one of them is conscious (learning). At the same time, the other one is subconscious (acquisition).

Learning is intentionally acquiring new information through experiences, such as instruction or study.

Acquisition is the process of learning a skill, habit, or characteristic by using the portion of the mind known as the subconscious.

Therefore, whether one wants a career in the medical field or as an attorney, one will need to be able to acquire and retain a significant quantity of knowledge. Suppose one wants to compete in the Olympics or become a famous

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musician. In that case, one needs to put in much work to educate one's subconscious to perform exceptionally well, whether one plays sports or gives musical performances. According to the new definition, the only conscious activity of the mind is one that is related to the process of learning. On the other hand, acquisition is connected to the processes controlled by the subconscious portion of our mind. The first stage, learning, is centred on the teacher, while the second stage, acquisition, is student-centred self-learning led by coaches. This is another contrast between learning and acquisition.

2. Traits Associated with Conscious Language Learning:[4]

Learning a second language using traditional techniques always involves some combination of intentional study and memory. They teach the four different aspects of language independently, hoping that one will remember what one has read, been taught, or shown to them. However, our brains include a system that allows us to forget things to prevent us from having too much knowledge. Because of this, adults often have terrible forgetting curves, problems with cross-translation, and an inability to think in the target language.

Learners suffer a second difficulty while using this method: the rate at which they can remember intentionally learned knowledge could be more active. Learners are often given advice that they should use spaced repetition to recall more material. The material provided here is helpful for anyone interested in becoming a lawyer, doctor, or other professional. However, this is the incorrect strategy to follow while learning a language since the information that has to be memorised does not enable learners to create two or three words per second, which is essential for natural conversation.

Our capacity for remembering things is limited, but our capacity to develop our talents unconsciously is almost limitless. Adults may learn to speak English fluently in less than a year using their subconscious mind, which does not forget anything. Mobile apps aid and facilitate the process of educating the subconscious mind.

3. Features of Subconscious Language Acquisition:[5]

Through the simultaneous performance of three activities—reading, listening, and speaking—the unique technique of subconscious training in English skills produces an environment for language learning. This environment allows for the acquisition of the target language. Teaching the subconscious requires little effort and eliminates the risk of forgetting. The ingrained habit of cross-translating into the local language is broken, and the ability to think in English and speak fluently is developed.

Students' brains unconsciously store language patterns while they read original digital material, listen to a recording, and speak aloud while wearing a headset. This allows students to start thinking in English and speak effectively by generating two or three words per second. The learner engages in self-directed learning by utilising the mobile app to complete the acquisition. Students need to shift their mentality to quickly acquire English abilities and move away from the conventional method of conscious learning and towards the more modern method of obtaining English skills via subconscious training.

4. English Language Teaching (ELT)

Wood's Despatch of 1854, also known as the Magna Carta of English Education in India, was the first educational policy declaration issued by the British Government and Company (48). The Despatch resulted from a parliamentary investigation before the Company's Charter renewal in 1853. The Directors sensed the pulse of the situation, the widening gap between the people and their rulers, and the widespread sense of alienation. To a considerable extent, the Despatch intended to assuage people's concerns and fears while also attempting to tone down Lord Macaulay's solid imperial rhetoric.

Wood's Despatch highlighted the following points:

1. The English language would be taught where there was a demand for it, and it would also be combined with careful attention to the study of the vernacular language of the district. English was not to replace the native languages.

2. The subject of the Christian religion would be provided outside of school hours, and only if asked for voluntarily.
3. Teachers must be trained.
4. The importance of female education.
5. Introduction of grants-in-aid through the Department of Education so that local bodies could be encouraged to take control of education.
6. The establishment of universities
7. The government's keenness to develop Indian languages
8. Extending European knowledge throughout all classes of people in India. The preamble to the Despatch gave reasons for developing education in India.

5. The Scope of ELT

The English language is now one of the languages spoken in the majority of countries around the globe. More than seven thousand languages are spoken globally, and our nation has more than seven hundred languages.[8] *Language* is an essential tool used to bring prosperity into people's lives and bring people together. People from all walks of life can communicate with one another and share their expertise through English. The ability to communicate in English opens up many doors to possibilities and cultures worldwide. The language of instruction and communication in multinational corporations is almost always English. The younger generation looking for work has no choice but to interact with customers from all over the globe, where the medium of communication is English and where the job must be delivered in the same language.[9] After that, English language examinations such as the "IELTS (International English Language Testing), the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), the PTE (Pearson Test of English), the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), the ACT (American College Testing), the GMAT, the MCAT," and other examinations are used for studies or further studies in our country as well as in any other country. They must take English classes to submit their applications for jobs in the public and commercial sectors. The proliferation of different training institutions around our nation is evidence of the significance of this language to the individuals' ability to advance in their careers and professionally. The language helps students become familiar with the environment in which they will work. Learning a language will provide one with more opportunities as well as exposure.

6. India's English-Language Education

People's expectations about the quality of their educational experiences have increasingly been benchmarked in terms of their degrees of English language competence and their capacity to communicate in an international setting. The fact that India is a multilingual nation that still uses some of its ancient languages highlights the significance of this language. Even though the English language does not originate in India, it has made a significant contribution to the improvement of society as well as the construction of unity among governments and countries. Although it is not one of India's fifteen official dialects, the English language is significant in many facets of Indian culture, such as higher education, social progress, and India's growth to its present position as a global economic giant.[10] The ordered technique of presenting English course books to win marks in English exams and assess language gained, alongside the assistance of numerous linguistic schools, shows our country's language-acquiring and teaching occupation as it currently exists.[11]

So, children in India study English beginning in elementary school and continuing through university education. They start learning it in the first or fifth grade, and it can be learned in English medium schools and schools that teach regional languages. The act of language occurs when a learner can utilise it self-assuredly for communication and become employable. Since so many people cannot acquire the necessary language abilities, increasing language instruction establishments are mushrooming throughout our nation.

7. The Beginnings

When the British first took control of India, they needed mediators' assistance to communicate their ideas and ensure that the Indian people followed their rules. This necessitated the establishment of educational institutions in India. So, those who could comprehend and use the language had a position of privilege throughout that era. The development of this idea provided our nation's educational system with a greater emphasis on the English language. Later on, it continued for several years, and it still plays a significant part in the globe even to this day.

The integration of English people in the 16th century to other places from their original country, when Great Britain rose as a colonial power, propagated English and established its roots in diverse nations. The primary goal of teaching English was for commerce by the British East India Company. Charles Grant laid the fundamental groundwork during the time that he spent in our country between the years 1767 and 1790. During this time, he proposed and demanded that English be implemented as the language for guidance as well as an association to keep up the communications between the ruler and the governed. This was the time when the basic framework was laid.[12] In addition, numerous commissions have considered alternative approaches to language acquisition, and the degree to which language acquisition is crucial for everyone has been considered. Teaching and education in English, as well as acquiring many disciplines via English and subjects such as customs, morality, practices, and others, first appeared in India in the seventeenth century.

English was one of several foreign languages that reached India simultaneously; nevertheless, due to education and effective government, English has become the predominant language in India. While serving as the director of the British government in India, Charles Grant devised the first strategy for introducing and implementing English education and instruction across the country. Charles Grant, the director of the East India Company at the time, devised the first strategy for teaching and learning English in India.[13] For some time, various missionaries hurried to India, intending to spread Christianity via English instruction. Because of the ongoing work of the Christian lobby, there is now a significant demand for English and education in English. Even the Committee of Public Instruction felt the heat from the requests. Between 1824 and 1835, students at Calcutta's Madrasa, the Benares Sanskrit College, Delhi College, Agra College, and other institutions that provided an Eastern education began taking English lessons. The new attitude, new ideas, and contemporary ethics served as an inspiration to the younger guys. They believed India was experiencing a renaissance then, so everyone raced to enrol in English lessons enthusiastically and seriously. They began producing poetry, short tales, and essays in English, and newspapers started distributing their work. English language knowledge was directly correlated to social standing during British rule in India.

8. The Post-Colonial

As the country gained its independence, there was an outpouring of intense patriotic sentiment, and people also strongly felt the need to regionalise the form of teaching they were receiving. While schools in some jurisdictions continued to provide English as one of their topics, educators in other states eliminated the language from their lesson plans.[14] One of India's most important education commissions was the Kothari Commission, active from 1964 to 1966. It was organised under the leadership of Daulat Singh Kothari, who was serving as head of the UGC at the time. The commission was established to implement education reforms nationwide and provide an educational framework. After consideration, they offered a three-language formula, prioritising Sanskrit, Hindi, and regional languages. In collaboration with these other languages, the significance of the English dialect as a language that has contributed to the advancement of science and technology all around the globe was brought to light. In addition, it was suggested that it be used as a global language.[15] The National Strategy on Education, which was created in 1986 when Rajiv Gandhi was in power, placed a strong emphasis on education with an approach that was centred on the child.

In addition to preparing students for successful careers, NEP 2020 emphasised that the primary goal of education should be to produce societies that are more active, socially engaged, and helpful, as well as to ensure the nation's economic well-being.[16]

9. Conclusion

English education in India reflects a long, complex history—from colonial imposition to a tool for empowerment and global communication. Emphasising subconscious acquisition alongside conscious learning aligns teaching with

natural cognitive processes and practical goals. Applying Krashen's theories through activity-based, learner-centered methods can make English education in India inclusive, effective, and globally competitive. Acquisition-focused pedagogy, in line with NEP 2020, offers a path to fluency, cultural understanding, and holistic development.

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