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Role of English Language in Business Communication – The Gandhian Turnabout

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This paper discusses the role of English language in business communication in terms of Gandhian thought. Mahatma Gandhi has a global relevance in academic and nonacademic spheres with his eclectic philosophy.

Gandhiji's Opposition to English as a Medium of Instruction

Gandhiji very much opposed the use of the foreign language English as the medium of instruction in his earlier life. He was of the opinion that a foreign language puts an undue strain upon the youngsters and stunts their growth and isolates them from their home.¹ Like every other Indian, he also faced the difficulties in the beginning and, later on, he evolved to be a product of three countries – India, England and South Africa.

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This paper intends to bring out the role and application of the language English in business communication in the light of the Gandhian foresight.

Role and Function of English in India and in Business Communication in India

English has its unique importance in our country. It has played a crucial role in building modern India. At present, it is one of the major languages used for communication in the world. In our country we have people living in different states speaking different languages. But here English plays a vital role of a bridge. It helps different natives of different regional dialects to communicate with each other.

English is a language which links us with the outside world. The prospects of employment for a person having knowledge of English are bright in every country.² In this 21st century we face a drastic change and a vast competition when it comes to employability. This helped develop the idea of a common and widely accepted language. It is here English as a foreign language raised to its present status.

For trade, teaching and learning, research and advancement, science and technology, information and revolution, there was a need for a common language. English became a Global language. In India, people going from North to South for education or business mostly communicate in English language, and it is one of the reasons that it has become a link language. Keeping this in mind, the Parliament has also recognized English as an official language in addition to Hindi. All the facts of history and developments in present day India underline the continued importance of learning English in addition to vernaculars.³

Here comes the relevance of discussing the Gandhian turnabout. Gandhi realized fully the importance of English. He also recognized that it was the social factors that raised English language to its present status because modern science and technology has reduced the world into a global village. It is necessary to say his attitude towards modern civilization, though critical, is not wholly negative. Being critical implies the desire to improve the object criticized. So Gandhi welcomes a number of its contributions from west⁴ as it was of prime concern when it came to business. The ideas of Gandhi have been widely used in different educational discourses in a global context.

Customer Service

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Gandhiji has said, “A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so.” From these words Gandhiji projected the customer service philosophy which is the indispensable element for business prospects.

Some of the most successful companies have one thing in common – incredible customer service. These businesses go out of their way to make the customer feel appreciated, understood and cared for. The end result of this is simple but powerful - a strong connection to the customer that goes deeper than the normal company-customer relationship.⁵ This shows the effectiveness of the global language English in business communication.

Objectives

- To explore and analyze the relationship between progress in business and English language ability.
- To study the effectiveness of English for business communication.
- To explore challenges in teaching English language for trade and commerce.
- To evaluate how people adjust with English to reflect the condition of social life.
- To explore and promote research on the status, possibility and challenges of teaching English for business communication in the global perspective.

Difficulties in Learning English

There are several instances which show that Gandhiji also faced difficulties in learning English language. But he was truthful and sincere from his childhood. When Gandhiji was a student at Rajkot, an educational inspector named Mr. Giles came to examine the pupils. They were asked to write five English words. Gandhi mis-spelt the word ‘kettle’. The teacher saw the mistake. He prompted Gandhi to copy down from his neighbour’s slate. But Gandhi refused. The result was that all the boys except Gandhi spelt every word correctly. Later, the teacher chided him for this “stupidity”, but without effect. He never learned the art of copying.⁶

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Arbitrary Spelling and Pronunciation

The main argument which prevailed when it came to English language learning was that more than half of our time was given to learning English and mastering its arbitrary spelling and pronunciation. It was a painful discovery for Gandhiji to have to learn a language that was not pronounced as it was written. It was a strange experience for him to learn spelling by heart.

Gandhiji became a product of three countries - India, England and South Africa. This was marked as a turnabout in Gandhian ideals. The above mentioned incidence is noteworthy as all Indians had faced the similar difficulties and situations when it came to English language learning. People started to think the effectiveness of a common language for trade and commerce. They began to analyze the relevance of a common medium of instruction for education worldwide. This led to the idea of teaching English for employability.

Shorter and Smarter Technology

Beginning of 21st century marked a revolution in shorter and smarter technology. Laptops, Internet, personal computers, tablets, smartphones, and mobile applications marked the 3rd generation technology. In this competitive world the real problem faced, according to former president of India APJ Abdul Kalam, is that “It is not unemployment that is the major problem; it is the question of unemployability that is the major crisis in this competitive arena”. There is indeed a need for English language. Otherwise we cannot rise ourselves as one among the developed countries.

Gandhi and Medium of Instruction

Gandhi was against the selection of English as a medium of instruction because it prevented the growth of our vernacular. The British rule imposed the foreign language English as the only language which Indians should receive as the medium of instruction. So Gandhi declared it as a de-indianizing practice or a rule against nationalism. He also considered it as a greatest evil of British rule. Gandhi also witnessed that foreign language has made our children practically foreigners in their motherland. The existing system of British curriculum could not solve any problem faced by Indians. Provincial languages were not given any rightful place in both society as well as educational system. The domination of

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English language was so great that even Sanskrit, Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi etc., had to be learnt through English and not through mother tongue. These reasons prevented Gandhiji from accepting English wholly.

What Is the Purpose of Learning English?

In the speeches and writings of Mahatma Gandhi, one may get a feeling that he is against foreign language, especially, English and modern civilization. About the education for manufacturing clerks, Gandhi speaks to youth of Madras as well as people all over India, “Are you receiving an education which will make you worthy to realize that ideal and which will draw the best out of you, or is it an education which has become a factory for making government employees or clerks in commercial offices? If that be the goal of your education, if that is the goal that you have set before yourself, I feel and I fear that the vision which the poet pictured for himself is far from being realized.⁷ It is here Gandhi wants to open our eyes. What Gandhiji objected to was the British colonialism which they tried to enforce on us even through their curriculum for their selfish motives and benefits.

English Learning Has Its Own Relevance

It is English education in the manner it has been given emasculated the English-educated Indian, it has put a severe strain upon the Indian student’s nervous energy, and has made us imitators. The process of displacing the vernacular has been one of the saddest chapters in the British connection.⁸ At the same time Gandhi realized fully the importance of English and he also speaks about Rammohan Rai and Lokamanya Tilak. Both gained their knowledge from the rich treasures of English. Gandhi states that the foreign language English also has rich treasures like other languages. But one should not be ashamed of our own mother tongue and translation from English literature is enough to solve the difficulties faced by the people in learning process. Vernacular will support the learner and wipe away stress and waste of time in learning foreign language English as a medium of instruction.

Literary Views

There are many instances in Gandhiji’s stories in ‘My Experiments with Truth’ which prove Gandhiji’s literary training had an all-embracing approach towards contemporary literary views. Gandhiji has said there were three moderns who had left deep impressions in

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his life and captivated him. They were Raychandbhai by his living contact, Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin by their books, “The kingdom of god is within you” and “Unto this last”. It is clear that both these revolutionary books were of course written in English. Another instance to be noted is literary training provided to the Tamil boys from South Africa by Gandhiji. The Tamil boys knew very little Tamil and did not know the script at all. So Gandhi taught them the script and the rudiments of grammar. Later on when Tamilians not knowing English came to see Gandhi, his pupils became his interpreters.⁹ This itself is a remarkable incident that Gandhi too had a positive attitude towards foreign language, English. One should never forget that Gandhiji too underwent his higher education in England (Barristry) in English language.

New Views on Complementary Roles

The aim of Gandhiji is not to degrade or replace any foreign language but to revise the conventional view. What we require is the development of a new notion in which people never contradict between vernacular and foreign language English but to re-establish a complementary view for teaching English for business communication and life enhancing learning process. Gandhiji’s attempt is only to point out some crucial limitations that are rooted in the British curriculum.

To Conclude

This paper attempted to lay emphasis on the role of English language in business communication and focused on exploring the ways to wipe away the language conflict prevailing in contemporary world through the application of Gandhian ideals, that is, the Gandhian turnabout. Finally to sum up I would quote Gandhiji’s words: “An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it.”

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