

Linguistic Exposure of English Through Leisure: A Sociological Analysis of Bengali and English Medium Students' Negotiations

Ishani Deb¹

Abstract:

English language is considered as a source of academic performance for students from the new middle-class background in India. But there is something called language expectation in terms of power and sociology of language at the micro level. This paper talks about the language expectations of the Bengali medium students in learning English and the behaviour of the English medium students from the middle class background by making use of technology and cultural aspects. The paper presents the students' conscious choice of films, songs and television series. The students in this generation are invariably inclined towards English followed by Hindi in terms of their choice of films, movies with Bengali as a third preference.

Keywords: English, Language expectation, cultural aspects, Bengali

¹ Ph. D Research Scholar (Former UGC Senior Research Fellow), Department of Sociology, University of Calcutta. Mobile: +91 9051714928/ E-mail Id: ishanideb1@gmail.com

Introduction:

Language is difficult to comprehend in its analysis. Language as a theme has made its prominence in various disciplines. The discipline of linguistics gives a conventional idea of dealing with language, the words' etymological knowledge. For a longer period, language has been dealt by linguists like Joshua Fishman, Thomas Ricento, and Suzanne Romaine (Hymes, 2010; Silva, 1994). These theorists provided perspectives on semantics, language learning and contributed on education policies (Garcia,1986; Ricento and Hornberger, 1996). Historians', Political theorists' and Anthropologists' views on language has largely been that of polemics on terminologies and words based on historical context. The focus on above mentioned disciplines also remained on political assertion on ethno-linguistic factors and on signs and communication aspects in a particular cultural milieu (Romaine, 1998; Bronner, 1998). But the analysis on language and on the individual experiences has not been in much focus in other disciplines. The analysis on language is mainly based on two factors: one is on the conceptualization of the official status of a language in any country and the other is on the dominant interconnecting language of the population. The Asian, African and Southern American nation-states had invariably been built on the remnants of colonial legacy (Escobar, 2001). These countries bore the ramifications of the colonialism, building their countries by unifying into a common cultural and language policies. Dilemma is also seen on these former colonial countries' stance on languages that are Eurocentric, for example English, Spanish, French etc (Phillipson and Kangas, 1996). India is no such exception. On one hand one can witness that every states of India battled it out on the status of a unitary official language and their confusing policies on dialects. On the other hand, the legislations on education policies have given primacy on both Hindi and English in order to prevent language dissention (Smitherman, 1995).

This policy is one of a contention. Teaching the hegemonic language becomes the task of the schools as a formal institution. English as a language has been strictly dealt in the English medium schools all over the country, wherein learning, speaking and interacting is thoroughly done in English (Wiley and Lukes, 1996). In the vernacular medium schools too, the target remains on the improvement of English language both in terms of speaking and learning the English language in the class. In most cases the aim of the latter case are not executed as per the expectations. The educational institutions emphasize on strict timeline for the students to cope up with the language (Slavin and Cheung, 2005). As a result these young children from the vernacular medium schools take up the extra burden of learning the

language and getting accustomed to it through activities like listening to English songs and watching English films and television series within their limited resources, contributing to the consumerist culture (Bartolome and Leistyna, 2006). The literature is available mostly in the form of various education commissions and on the degrading state of the government schools as against the private schools (focusing on the role and importance of English language at the tangential level). There has been very little work on how the students respond to the ways in which they try to get a grasp over English and what their views are on English in the neo liberal era. Therefore, this paper looks into the students' perception of how knowing English becomes a compulsion reflecting on a differential access towards their choice of films, songs and television series. The study focuses on the ninth and tenth graders of Kolkata from both the English and the Bengali medium schools.

Review of Literature:

Limited studies have been done in the Indian context on the young children's opinion on the ways the school students engage in learning English from the unconventional sources. However, there are plenty of studies sufficing this investigation of the role of English language in leisure activities. The studies have focused on the similar situation in the other countries like U.S., U.K., Malaysia, China reflecting on the situation of the children and youth of this generation who are at the receiving end of language acquiring. One such study is by Guangwei Hu (2008) in *The Misleading Academic Discourse on Chinese-English Bilingual Education in China*. Although it is widely believed that English has not been able to make an immense impact unlike India, but people are succumbing to the pressure of keeping pace in English communication. The writer narrates the incident he witnessed once while travelling- "I was amazed to hear the bus conductor announce the itinerary in crisp Chinese and unintelligible English. When I asked why she had announced the bus stop in English, she replied that it was indicative of her company's competitiveness and quality service" (Hu,2008, pp.203). Apparently, it might seem that activities outside the formal institution, leisure and hobbies have little connection with English. But another study has been conducted in the Texas and the South Carolina provinces of the United States (Salinas et al.,2014). The study was done among the Hispanic immigrants. Three categories of people were considered. First group of people are the Hispanics people who arrived at a later stage. The second category is the children who were born and raised in the United States and the

third category is the young people who arrived in the host country at a very younger stage. The results reflect the varying degrees of English learning and subsequently their frequency of interaction with the people of the host country. The younger generation and the children are more fluent in their interaction in English when they show keen interest in leisure activities of various kinds at home and outside as compared to the older generation.

A report was published in 'The Hindu' newspaper by Sumanyu Sathpathy on 27 September 2012. The problem is not just with English. The vernaculars are facing a stiff competition from Hindi language as well. Both the languages are in demand in the environment where films, television shows and songs are guided by the technological intervention (Fishman and Lovas, 1970) in the form of YouTube, Netflix, torrentz sites. Sathpathy invoked Ramchandra Guha's views that hegemonic languages and heteronormative ideologies of Bollywood and Hindi commercial films that are providing impetus to both English and Hindi simultaneously. And on the aspect of the English language Sathpathy further invoked writer Rupa Bjava's novel *The Sari Shop* in which the protagonist becomes obsessed in learning English overriding his profession of selling saris and starts to fetishize the Oxford English Dictionary. This is particularly the case with the teenage school students for the vernacular medium causing them to be paranoid of the fact that the lack of ability to speak English and Hindi would hamper their self-esteem (Andrade, 2009). Therefore, they engage in activities of listening to English songs, watching English films with subtitles just to learn English that would be easier for them to communicate in basic and comprehensive English. Identical apprehension has been put forth by the noted Indian scholar on education and childhood Krishna Kumar (2009). Strict time bound classroom pedagogy has resulted in causing children to turn themselves into the perfect recipient of the neo-liberal society. This in turn causes them to outperform in the academic sphere consistently and creates a tension in their language learning. Therefore, the entire process becomes a means of to an end.

Objective:

The paper therefore presents the Bengali medium students' negotiations towards English learning as against the English medium students in their conscious choice of films, songs and television series through varied social and cultural capital.

Method:

Sixty-Eight students of the Ninth and Tenth grades were interviewed. The respondents were chosen on the basis of non-probability sampling. The students belonged to different English and Bengali medium schools in Kolkata. The site of interview was in the homes of the students because of easy accessibility unlike in the school premise. However, three female students had an interaction with the researcher within the school premise of Jagatpur Rukmini Vidyamandir School, Behala. This permission as well as the arrangement was made by the Principal of the concerned school. The interviews lasted between one and a half hours to two hours depending on how well the students were articulate. In depth interviews was done and narratives enabled the subjective experiences of the students. The field work began around March 2017 and lasted around April 2019.

Analysis:

The findings suggest that the IXth and the Xth standard students don't exclusively listen to only English or Hindi or Bengali songs. The students engage in such activities through a combination of these options based on their preference. Although it is true that Hindi and English lyrics are in demand for the younger generation. As shown in the Table 1., 2.94% students listen to Bengali tunes. 16.18% students are engaged in listening Hindi songs. 21.29% listen to Hindi and English music. And this chunk shows that numerically eleven English medium students are into Hindi and English songs. Seven Bengali medium students love listening English and Hindi music. This is shown in the table below. 19.18% students listen to Bengali and Hindi songs. Here too picture gives an interesting point i.e. eleven Bengali medium students listen to Bengali and Hindi songs. Whereas only two English medium students listen to Bengali and Hindi songs. 5.88% students listen to Bengali, Hindi and English songs. 20.59% listen to English songs. As per the segmentation ten English medium students listen to English songs as against four Bengali medium students. 2.94% students listen to Bengali and English songs. Interesting fact is that whenever the combination of Bengali songs get added in the English and Hindi combination, then the percentage drastically comes down as against the English and Hindi songs, whether as combination or separately. Another point is that English medium students are inclined more towards English songs than the Bengali medium songs as compared to the Bengali medium students who are bit inclined towards Hindi and Bengali, even though the Bengali medium students listen to English music. Table 2., below Table 1., gives an idea of the range of singers that the students love to listen.

Table 1. Representation of Students Listening to Songs

LANGUAGE	ENGLISH MEDIUM	BENGALI MEDIUM	PERCENTAGE
BENGALI	1	1	2.94%
HINDI	5	6	16.18%
HINDI-ENGLISH	11	7	21.29%
BENGALI-HINDI	2	11	19.18%
BENGALI-HINDI-ENGLISH	4	0	5.88%
ENGLISH	10	4	20.59%
BENGALI-ENGLISH	2	0	2.94%
Don't Listen to Songs	4	0	5.88%
N=68			

Table 2. Names of the Favourite Singers of the Students

English Singers	Hindi Singers	Bengali Singers
Arianna Grnade	Arijit Singh	Rupam Islam
Justin Beiber	Arman Malik	Rupankar Bagchi
Chainsmkoers	Shreya Ghosal	Rabindra Sangeet
Shaun Mendes	Kishore Kumar	Nazrul Geeti
Jennifer Lopez	Honey Singh	Nachiketa
Beatles	Jeet Ganguly (Hindi Versions)	Anupam Roy
Pink Floyd	Asha Bhonsle	Arijit Singh (Bengali versions)
DJ Snake		Jeet Ganguly (Bengali Versions)
Taylor Swift		
Charlie Puth		
Mike Jagger		
Ed Sheeran		
Akon		
Eminem		
Denver		
Zayn Malik		

The researcher has interviewed sixty-eight students, out of which thirty-five are from English medium and thirty-three are from Bengali medium. The purpose of mentioning this aspect is that not all students receive adequate amount of leisure to watch and listen to songs. Although these students do watch television shows and webseries as well in English and Hindi, for example in Discovery, NatGeo, Masterchef U.K, Australia, Netflix. Twelve students rewind themselves through films, television shows, web platform. In this case eighteen students from Bengali medium watch movies (English, Hindi and Bengali). Within the chunk of eighteen students, two students watch only Bengali movies. Channels like HBO, WB are the favourites of the Bengali medium students. The students responded that in order to become aware of the foreign accents, they students mostly watch the English movies with subtitles. In fact, whether the students listen to Hindi songs at regular intervals or seldom listening to Bengali songs, getting acquainted with English pop, Reggie and country folk becomes an important factor for these students so as not to feel ashamed of not knowing one. And this isn't the case with Bengali medium students alone. The requirement to update oneself about these new age artists and actors is a constant struggle for these young children from both English and the Bengali medium schools. A Xth standard student from South Point responded- *'Me and my elder sister is a big fan of Arijit Singh and Atif Aslam.... We, don't listen to English songs, not that interested and does give an awkward feeling in my friend circle when they discuss about the English artist. I will not deny that this happens to me and may be to other person as well who happens to be in the same boat as mine.'* He watches English action movies. Another Xth standard student from Calcutta Girls says-*'When I am in the street with my friends then I feel shy to listen to Bengali songs even if I am using headphones. So, I listen to English songs. If I am at home then I listen to Bengali songs of Rupankar Mitra, Anupam Roy. Hindi, I don't like the Dhinchak tunes. You can listen to those songs once or twice when you feel like dancing like crazies during parties and farewell. Otherwise, I like Coldplay while having tea in the evening. At that time, I and my elder sister hum the tune...'* When asked about movies she said- *'I watch netflix and tv series more. They are a rage now. I watch suits, friends, 13 reasons why, how to get away with murders. I am eagerly waiting for the next season. These TV series gives a realistic picture of adolescent problems. So, if for example if you haven't watched friends then you are not in this world!'* This behavior subtly becomes an imperative for the Bengali medium students to express their views on

why it becomes necessary to sail with the flow- *'I don't listen to songs. My elder sister listens to English songs. I don't have any idea regarding artists. I watch movies though...English periodical dramas, animation, action movies. I have recently watched Zootopia. I have a fascination for Steven Spielberg's movies like Schindler List, War Horse. Also Tarantino's Inglorious Bustards...and sometimes I can catch the mistakes in the subtitles' ... (smiling confidently) ... 'Hindi is a big no for me. because for me bollywood means rampant copy of English films and as for Bengali films are concerned except for Feluda and Kakababu series I notice the storylines are all the same and crappy. My fellow classmates may end up construing that I am a kind of show off and don't anything about the films of my country and feel why this obsession for Hollywood is. But one aspect can never be denied that whatever the Hollywood does is original.'* This was the response of a Xth standard student of Jadavapur Vidyapith. IXth standard student from Kamala Girls feels- *'I like Hindi soft romantic songs, not the DJ one's.'* She was explicitly in mentioning that she dislikes Bengali music... *'Whatever my mother listens but I don't listen to the Bengali songs that much'* On Hindi songs she replies...*'exact reason I won't be able to say but the lyrics and the tunes strike a chord with the younger generation and are quite popular. For some the lyrics attract the listeners while for some tunes attract the listeners. For me the tunes attract me more than lyrics. I even introduce some new music to my mother'*. She responded on the reason for her preference of English movies than the movies in her mother tongue.... *'Bengali I have mostly seen Feluda. My mother tries her best to introduce old Bengali movies. This afternoon we were watching Ogo Badhu Sundar but I didn't have that patience to watch it for long...Hindi I would say quite less because I don't get much time. Since my neighbor 'pishi' stays very close to my house therefore she calls me and informs me of recent and not so recent English horror movies...(Subtitles?) ... Yes, with subtitles. She downloads the film and I sometimes tell her to rewind a particular portion if I happen to not understand it. For example, most of my classmates watched 'The Conjuring' in Hindi. I was determined to watch in English. I watched Insidious, Annabelle.*

The young students of fifteen and sixteen years old are at the juncture where they are in the process of assessing and evaluating career options with the help of their parents and guardians. They become individuals after their school. Their individuality gets prominent in the job sectors as well as in the higher education spheres which is shaped by multitasking,

specialization and information driven communication. Therefore, these students especially the vernacular medium students get accustomed to English language through films, television shows and songs of both English and Hindi language outside the school space and vernacular completely taking a back seat. The students are under the impression that they will be receptive in their interaction in the wider circles in the future and perform at par with the English medium students who they feel are already immuned. Therefore, these teenagers implicitly become a part of the modernized India (Oza, 2001).

Conclusion:

Language has a functional utility. Language binds the entire community to execute a rational action towards a modern economy. Mother Tongues and dialects exist but it is through the State legislations and policies that mother tongues and dialects are made to compete with each other. That is the concept of ‘language’ is born and thereby tow aspects are denoted; one is the declaration of an official language and the other is the identification of a language that can cause people to speak in the unitary speech. The latter language hereby contributes to the exchange economy and is market oriented in the neo liberal capital economy based on specialization, heteronormativity. It is analogous in this case with respect to Hindi and English in the Indian scenario. Therefore, this language gets produced in the capital form in the cultural spheres as well in the form of films, songs and the entire industry. “Unification of Linguistic market” (Bourdieu, 1991. Pp 49), individuals’ “position in space” (Bourdieu, 1991. Pp 230) and “power and prestige” being attached to the language that yields profit (Bourdieu, 1991. Pp. 230) are some of the connotations that can be best used to describe the young students’ perception on jostling for knowing the dominant Hindi and the hegemonic English.

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