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ENGLISH ACADEMY

The Importance of English as a World Language

by A. NORMAN JEFFARES

WHEREVER we may be on the surface of the earth, we communicate with each other as human beings. And this gift of ours for speech — and ultimately for what we call literacy — usually forms part of our mythology: there are many stories to explain it in all the languages. Yet when we think about the wider problems of communication beyond those of man with man and extend the idea to cover the communication of one language area with another, we also run into myth. And the myth which comes to mind is, of course, the building of the tower of Babel. It is a useful story for it seems to remind us of the difficulties which occur when disparate languages exist as barriers between groups of men, when these languages prevent men from communicating. That is to say, prevent them from fully exercising their human birthright, their capacity to convey to other human beings the results of their intellectual activity or their feelings.

It is possible, however, to think of other myths too. The politician may look retrospectively at the Roman Empire — when the use of one language over a large area enabled an administrative machine to function efficiently within that area, and to bring to its inhabitants a period of law, order and development. Again the scholar may look back at the medieval period and that of the Renaissance as times when intellectual, diplomatic, and commercial affairs could be conducted in the **lingua franca** of Latin through the medium of which the Church exerted its influence upon the lives and thoughts of men.

And yet why should we indulge in this process of glancing over the shoulder at the past when the present gives us a wider and more exciting prospect than ever before?

We live in an age of expansion and technological expertise. The industrial revolution of the West has brought about a vast improvement in conditions of living. The rest of the world, and especially Africa and Asia, wants the same advantages and sees them as stemming from education. In education the role of the English language, it at present, in many cases, an essential one throughout the world.

In this lecture, then, I should like to consider some of the circumstances in which English is taught, to view its changing role within those circumstances, and to consider some of the problems which now arise — in urgent, dramatically pressing form, in the course of the attempts, world-wide attempts, which are being made to respond to a world-wide demand for more teaching of the English language.

English teaching overseas

I propose to deal in the first place with the history of British and American teaching of English overseas during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries(1). By overseas I mean largely in India and Africa — the teaching of English in European or westernized countries has been, and is, less of a problem because in these cases English has been taught within an educational framework where an indigenous language has existed with comparable linguistic and literary resources. And by saying largely in India and Africa I mean to suggest that the British effort in this field is of longer standing than the American.

India

1. In India Christian missionaries carried out educational work from an early date, but by 1787 the East India Company had begun to subsidise schools established by the local Rajahs for the teaching of English. And by 1813 an act of Parliament required that money should be spent on Indian education, to revive and improve literature, to encourage "the learned natives of India," and to introduce and promote knowledge of the sciences. In 1830 English was decided upon as a medium of instruction for establishing English education. A literary and general cultural aim informed this system of education, which drew upon English methods and traditions. It worked well for a minority., but when the Indian educational system expanded, the snags inherent in it soon became more apparent. English was being taught as a dead rather than a living language, and when English was abandoned as a medium, there arose a need for new methods of teaching the language in India. Yet the aims so forcibly put

by Macauley in his speeches in the 1830's have had their effect, as Indians from Mr. Nehru down have not been slow to admit.

English was taught and examined in India as it was in England; and ultimately it carried English culture and ideas; it has helped in Humayun Kabir's words, to inculcate "the spirit of scientific enquiry" and in Mr. Nehru's, it is now India's "chief link with the outside world."

Many Indians also acknowledge their political debts to the democratic ideas imported with the English language. But other political problems exist, and the Indian desire to use Hindi as a universal language in India is one of them. Yet despite this pressure for Hindi (which means that English has become a foreign language rather than a second language in Indian education) English appears to be more widely used in India at a lower standard of skill than was formerly attained by a smaller number of Indians.

There is, indeed, an increased motivation for learning English. India's development as an independent nation has strengthened some of the earlier assets, political, economic, or cultural, which a knowledge of English gives its possessors. The political usefulness of English increases as India increasingly plays a part in international affairs; the economic increases as the English-speaking nations channel increasing aid to India to try to help her to ameliorate the lot of her vast population; and as her economy expands internationally also, there is a need for English for business purposes; one might, for example, instance the working of such international concerns as Air India and Tata's; and the cultural usefulness increases also, though in a new way, for now it is not so much English literature that is needed as a knowledge of English for the future scientists and technologists.

Africa

In British Africa Christian missionaries played a major part in nineteenth century education, and governmental agencies did not teach English until the twentieth. But the aims were much as in India; examinations tested the teaching, and the curriculums were aligned with those in Britain. Thus English literature, as in India, was largely studied rather than the English language. And the teaching was based on broad general educational aims rather than any dogmatic approach to linguistic study.

But in the twenties and thirties of this century, however, some attempt was made on admirable political, social and educational grounds, to teach through vernacular languages. But the problems raised were vast (e.g. no literary background in the vernaculars themselves; too few speakers of too many languages for economic production of printed material; not enough knowledge of the vernaculars on the part of the educators), and a change to English at some stage in the education of the child was inevitably necessary. The use of area languages like Swahili only **put off** the switch to English in the education of a child. In effect, the Africans themselves have wanted teaching to be through English rather than through a vernacular medium. (The recent Ashby Commission on Education in Nigeria has, for instance, made a wider public aware of these needs in no uncertain manner). Progress, educationally, economically, politically, is seen as bound up with English.

The British contribution to the teaching of English overseas has usually, then, been based upon an insistence upon meaning and upon general educational aims. There has also been a sense that to teach a new language in a new country will affect an alteration in the student's world; he will, in effect, rebuild his own world for himself — and perhaps rebuild another world for us.

As far as official activities have gone, there has been a change in policy. The British Council grew up, in part, as a result of responding to demands for the teaching of the English language and its literature, made by adults who were already educated in their own cultures (especially in Argentine and Brazil). Its work was often remedial—that is to say, its teachers were altering preformed ideas of the language—and indeed of the literature which had been imported by earlier teachers. In part these British Council teachers had used texts which were designed for the use of English-speaking teachers. But the text books were often not suitable for overseas teachers. As the situation has changed, so has the need for different text books suited to their areas. And, of course, the British Council has now to teach English, not as a **foreign** language but as a **second** language — and the problem is again twofold—the need for more and better teaching.

American teaching of English

2. American teaching of English overseas may be regarded as beginning on a large scale when the ship **Thomas** arrived in the Philippines in 1898 with a cargo of a thousand American schoolteachers, later known as Thomasites. Teaching also took place in Puerto Rica, but the first governmental activity in the twentieth century took place in the late nineteen-thirties when a division of U.S. cultural relations was set up with a responsibility for giving direct assistance in English teaching in Latin America. After the 1939-45 war the American cultural relations programme extended to other

parts of the world, notably the Near and Far East and Africa; and now American teaching of English overseas is carried on by private agencies, universities, governmental agencies, as well as through U.N. agencies—activities to be added to by the work of the Peace Corps.

The Commonwealth

There are, of course, other developments within the Western world. There are activities within the Commonwealth such as that of Australia, which is helping in the programme of English teaching in Indonesia. Again, in Wellington a centre is being set up for the teaching of the English language. There is the startlingly successful activity of the French in developing new methods of reading English in their centres St. Cloud and Besançon. And then again there is the massive teaching effort of the Russians, both inside Russia, where much progress has been made, and outside; there is also a Chinese programme of English language teaching, some evidence of which is given by Chinese broadcasts to Africa.

All in all, therefore, it is reasonably safe to say that never before has such a concentration of effort taken place in the teaching of one language throughout the world.

B. **The changing rôle of English Language Teaching**

In effect, what has happened is that the upsurge of new nations and the general increase in their demands for education have created a need both for wider and for more specialised English teaching, and for teaching **in** English throughout the world. Possession of English is no longer the mark of a member of a ruling class, a cultural achievement; it is an essential part of any life which is lived in contact with international politics, economics, business, technology, etc. For English is a universally "accepted" language — consider its use, for instance, in aviation, where, shall we say, a Russian plane landing in Japan or a Swedish one landing in South America will be talked down **in English.**

How has English been taught as a language? I have suggested previously that English was taught abroad as in England — the goal being the attainment of a civilised knowledge of English culture as interpreted and exemplified in English literature. But, you will say, even in England, some attention must have been paid to the language, and this is true.

English teaching in England

The teaching of English in England rested in part upon a knowledge of the classics; admission to Oxford and Cambridge used to depend in part upon such knowledge; and English as a language was taught in terms of Latin grammar. The kind of grammar representative of this kind of teaching, was that of J. C. Nesfield, a good book in the hands of a good teacher. On the other hand the dissenting Academies taught English without Latin, and their tradition has been very useful indeed.

After the great educational programmes of the nineteenth century in England were instituted, it took time to show that education could not be given uniformly to all children. While the classical influence persisted, a critical use of language was often acquired by children who learned foreign languages, dead or living, a process which taught them, sometimes incidentally, their own language's grammatical structure and syntax; but other influences were also at work. For instance, educational and psychological theories helped a process of enlivening education by throwing out some of the dull elements in curricula — in many cases "formal grammar" became a term of abuse and "analysis," an elaborate insult.

These developments, however, are of minor importance when they are seen against a larger issue—the whole question of linguistic theory.

English in the Universities

In England departments of English came late into the university world—some of the furore their introduction caused can be gathered from Stephen Potter's **The Muse in Chains** and E. M. W. Tillyard's **The Muse Unchained.** (In Scotland, of course, English had long been a university subject, because learning it helped to ease the largely Scots-speaking Scot on his journey south to the wealth of London or a life of power and responsibility abroad). One result of the late growth of English schools in English universities was that there was a great emphasis upon Anglo-Saxon and Medieval English language—in part to make the courses in English appear to carry the same kind of linguistic weight as did the courses in Classics. And this emphasis upon philology tended to keep English scholars away from the kind of activity that marked the work of Danish or Dutch or Swedish grammarians —who were faced with the problems of teaching the English language to their pupils. And so Jespersen, the Dane, was followed by Zandvoort, the Dutchman. Again, the work of American linguists like Bloomfield and Chomsky appeared supreme. And in comparison to the work of their grammarians and linguists, it used to be said that Britain was useful in classroom technique, but not in linguistic theory. And it is only now that younger English linguists are taking their places in the universities, men who are deeply concerned with research into, and teaching of, the contemporary English we all use. Their rôle is largely due to the work of the late Professor J. B. Firth, whose descriptive work can be so useful to the teaching of language.

THE TASK OF THE GRAMMARIANS

We can hope, in fact, at least that English grammarians and experts in linguistics, in style and syntax, will provide **thought** about the whole process of communication in the English language, about the language itself. We can hope, too, that they will take their place alongside continental scholars, those of America, and others at work elsewhere on problems connected with the English language and its teaching.

Conferences on the teaching of English

Several conferences have pointed the way to this happy co-operation. They can be separated into intellectual and political, and in each case there has been an imaginative expansion of aim. The intellectual position was made very clear at the Conference of Professors of English and Education, held at Nutford House, London, in December 1960. At this it was noted that there was an increasingly urgent demand for more English teaching overseas, and that this demand was but part of a greater need for wider and more specialised teaching of English. This conference thought that ultimately the requirements for English teaching ought to be met by the countries where the need for English exists. The conference thought that the English-speaking countries have a duty to provide not merely interim aid, but also responsible guidance in problems of the use of language in education. (Interim aid requires men and women with training in specialised skills and disciplines). It also believed the immediate needs should be met

(1) by providing increased financial aid to overseas universities and training colleges, and by subsidizing British staff to work in them;

(2) by providing a career service overseas for British experts in English language teaching; and

(3) by the United Kingdom universities educating British graduates for specifically overseas work, as well as receiving overseas staff for training.

The conference stressed the need for research and for an information centre to make readily available existing knowledge, to co-ordinate work between centres where teaching and research is carried on.

The second conference was that held at Makerere College in Uganda in January of this year. This conference was attended by representatives from the United Kingdom and the countries of the Commonwealth (South Africa was, incidentally, represented). This conference regarded the problems from a Commonwealth point of view. The conclusions were that more teachers are needed at all stages, indigenous to the country in which the teaching takes place. But the need for expatriate teachers who would train university lecturers, training college teachers and school teachers was recognized. The need for reliance on new methods of teaching, making use of linguistics was stressed, and a large survey of problems was undertaken. Among the recommendations stress was again laid on the need for a centre for information serving the Commonwealth.

On the whole, the value of the Report of the Makerere Conference is that it is the first large survey of the aims, methods and needs of those who are teaching and wish to develop the teaching of English as a second language. It has drawn attention to the need for the collection of much more information about relationships between English and other disciplines, the need for using new teaching materials, for providing specialized courses for different groups of people, for fresh thinking about syllabuses and examinations, and especially for more research into English as a language. The Report is a blueprint for a vast amount of intellectual and pedagogical activity.

The problem of how such activity is to be stimulated and supported publicly is largely a political one. And the main problem here is to ensure that once large programmes are under way, they will not conflict with other similar programmes. There have been a number of conferences designed to obviate such a waste of energy as between British and American efforts. The first of these meetings was held in Oxford in 1955 when the British Council invited two members of the U.S.I.A. to attend an annual Council staff conference on the teaching of English overseas. The British Council, I should remark here, has been made the Government's instrument for such work, though it is itself an independent body. The next conference was held at the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington in 1959. The latest conference has just been held at Cambridge this summer.

The result of these conferences has been a steady pooling of information. This year, for instance, both American and British membership included a large number of academies—for the universities have a vital rôle in the whole business of English language teaching: they provide theory, they test it in language laboratories and in the field, and they act as pools of information.

But more is needed than mere exchanging of information—a difficult matter in the case of American work, as there are so many American agencies involved in this work (and in some cases their work is linked with political aims). There is a kind of headquarters agreement between

British and American services which has not always penetrated to the field workers.

Possibilities of co-operation

There are, however, some striking examples of co-operation which are most likely to benefit the host country—whose views have always to be considered, whose educational systems may not always easily assimilate overseas teaching methods. The obvious case is the Central Institute of English in Hyderabad. Here the Ford Foundation provides capital expenditure and non-rupee running costs, the Union Government provides rupees for running costs, and the British Council has lent three of its staff to serve under Dr. Gokak, an Indian Director. Another possible pattern for future development is the operation in Uganda. Here some one hundred and fifty American teachers will work in Uganda schools—they are to be paid for by the American I.C.A., to be selected by Columbia University, to be trained in the University of London, and in Makerere College in Uganda before they begin work. This is a tripartite procedure which seems most likely to afford an example of how to achieve the best results, to the satisfaction of the host country, the educational experts in Britain and the United States, and, not least, to the pupils and the teacher—the people who really matter.

From a long-term point of view, we need an information centre in the United Kingdom, comparable to the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington. There is a clear requirement for having available in one centre information about

(1) research in universities, in training colleges, in governmental departments;

(2) about experimental work in the field;

(3) about the needs for English teaching abroad.

There is also a need for a body, perhaps this proposed centre, to sponsor some of the travelling which is essential in this work—to be able, for instance, to send a scholar to, say, Sarawak, to advise on local problems—or again, to be able to send an administrator to some specific language course or conference to learn from others and share his experiences with them. There is a lot, for example to be learned from the Australian methods of teaching English in Indonesia, and the system of testing they use in order to assess the linguistic capacities of overseas students to benefit from attending courses in Australian universities or technical colleges.

One of the results of these conferences has been a constant strengthening of the position of the linguists, the practitioners of both theoretical and applied linguistics. The point about linguistics is largely, I suppose, that it offers a theory of how language works. It offers, according to Dr. M. A. K. Halliday, an intellectual framework of categories and relationships, it offers a criterion for the description of a language, and it offers an insight into the relationship between language and social situations.

It is the social situation which has created this great new need for English on a scale utterly unprecedented. Few people have the imaginative resources to grasp the implications of the situation. Educational aims throughout the world have not before been allied so closely to the need for possession of one specific language. Its assets are international.

In order that these assets can be made available there is need for more than the provision of more trained teachers and more persons who will educate them. The whole status of the teaching profession must be raised. If we believe in education, then we should regard those who teach our children, and the children of others, as persons of vital importance within any state. The success of genuine education depends upon our recognising this importance of attracting the best kind of person to enter the teaching profession, a thing which does not always happen at present, especially when there is an increasingly obvious shortage of really intelligent (and unselfish) men and women throughout a world which is constantly creating new and complex rôles which demand to be filled by highly intelligent people. The claims of the teaching profession in an adequate share in the number of people of intelligence and integrity must be put strongly; the profession itself must be one that can both attract and hold them. For upon their efforts will depend very largely the ability of their pupils to use English.

Let us not forget that learning this language is a first step to discovering the riches of its literature: and literature is the highest because the most deliberate, careful, thoughful and imaginative form of communication known to man: it is, as Thucydides put it, a κτῆμα ἐς ἀεὶ, a possession for ever. We should then regard the learning of English not only as a means to some materialistic end but as a key to further educational processes. These are the processes by which the people, all the people, who make up different nations can be enabled to speak to each other. And speaking is better than shooting.

(1) I am indebted to several unpublished papers written on this subject by Mr. J. Perren, of the British Council.