

**NON –NATIVE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE:  
FACTS AMIDST FUN AND FANTASY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Though the galloping speed of development in the field of science and technology readily signifies the quick accessibility of any mundane stuff through the multiple mechanisms, the context of language learning, for non-native learners in particular, is still fraught with almost incorrigible realities. The situation becomes even more worrying for the learners of hinterlands of a country like India (non-native nation) where English is taught from sixth standard/class onwards, let alone the strangeness of the pedagogic styles adopted and implemented for teaching in English and the complete absence of linguistic infrastructures evolved for a non-native language like English. To make things worse, the disturbing peculiarities of English language, particularly of its spelling and phonetic anomalies, often pose hostile learning situations for the non-native speakers of the language. The paper under discussion titled **Non –native Learners of English Language: Facts Amidst Fun and Fantasy** is an oriented endeavour to explore the issues from the linguistic-phonetic perspective of both L-1 i.e. one's mother tongue and L-2 i.e. English in the present case. The factual references that emerge from the discussion establish the task of impeccable learning of an L-2(English) as a herculean problem while the persistent emphasis on learning English remains a mere fantasy amidst the funny and hilarious contexts of L1 on the one side and stable oddities of English phonetics. Meticulous attention has been paid to the pertinent illustrations of regional language queer interventions and phonetic discrepancies of English as language both for native and non- native learners and the reception of non-native performances of English users in India pervading across all genres of literature i.e. drama, novel, story, translations etc.

**KEY WORDS: Language, Pedagogy, Phonetics, Multi-lingual, Native, Non-Native Learners**

**I**

That learning English as a second or foreign language is an unavoidable necessity, it occasions the illustration of certain core issues like the subtleties of L-1, intricacies of L-2, psycho-behavioural aspects and paralinguistic characters of a language –all of which considerably influence the language learning phenomenon for the non-native speakers. These concerns of language learning become even more profound when placed in a multilingual country like India where English is spoken or rather used as a second language. The plurality of regional languages has an active impact on the individual learners of English resulting in the hilarious situations often observable in both oral and written practices of the learners. Yet at the same time, with all the troubles of dialectal intervention, India perhaps stands to be the largest home of what is now realised and recognised as ‘new Englishes’ or ‘World Englishes<sup>1</sup>’. The recognition of English variants emanating from the regional languages is the result of concerted creative endeavour of the non-native countries like India, South Africa, Singapore and Latin America, through their literary manifestations, where English is spoken as a second language, against the hegemonic supremacy of the British English. Yet again, when it comes to learning English as a second/foreign language in India, as it is the prime concern of the paper loudly suggested by the title, ground reality of learning an L-2 like English is formed by both the

almost inescapable interventions of the regional language on the one hand and eternally fixed oddities of English phonetics on the other hand. Thus, the paper under discussion intends to explore the tri-dimensional phenomenon of English language learning in India, namely dialectal influence on language learning in oral practices, Indian variants of English as written with commonly followed grammatical constructions and the phonetic oddities of English language making learning a cumbersome experience. As such, the paper extends over four sections including the running one with an endeavour to incorporate the prevailing contexts of learning an L-2 like English in a country like India which is characterised by multiple regional languages and cultures.

Though the galloping speed of development in the field of science and technology readily signifies the quick accessibility of any mundane stuff through the multiple mechanisms, the context of language learning, for non-native learners in particular, is still fraught with almost incorrigible realities. The situation becomes even more worrying for the learners of hinterlands of a country like India (non-native nation) where English is taught from sixth standard/class onwards, let alone the strangeness of the pedagogic styles adopted and implemented for teaching English and the complete absence of linguistic infrastructures evolved for a non-native language like English. To make things worse, the disturbing peculiarities of English language, particularly of its spelling and phonetic anomalies, often pose hostile learning situations for the non-native speakers of the language. The paper under discussion titled *Non –native Learners of English Language: Facts Amidst Fun and Fantasy* is an oriented endeavour to explore the issues from the linguistic-phonetic perspective of both L-1 i.e. one's mother tongue and L-2 i.e. English in the present case. The factual references that emerge from the discussion establish the task of impeccable learning of an L-2(English) as a herculean problem. Meticulous attention has been paid to the pertinent illustrations of regional language queer interventions and phonetic discrepancies of English as language both for native and non- native learners and the reception of non-native performances of English users in India pervading across all genres of literature i.e. drama, novel, story, translations etc.

Language with its profound implications entails greater exercises on the lover of communication as a skill than any other medium does since language itself has its own skills instrumental in creating efficacious communicator of the world over. Ironically enough, most of us claim to communicate, but only a few of us are actually able to do so. Most of our time is spent out in our unconscious act of speaking ending up in a fiasco from communication point of view. But, the same is very often mistakenly understood to be our communication. The chief reason to be accounted for such result is that we exercise communication as a singularly informal affair oblivious of its serious do's and don'ts which essentially again calls for the role of language therein. Many a time, as the part of my pedagogical initiative, I have seen students speak for longer duration, on a topic of debate, yet communicating nothing literally. And, yet at other times, I have to deal with students who clamour for more marks than their friends simply because they claim they have written more than their friends. Thus, the magnitude of speech or writing is simply immaterial if one fails to communicate the requisite meaning thereof.

## II

The efficacy of English language learning particularly for a non- native learner of the language is subject to his intelligibility of linguistic skills. The skills are popularly known as LSRW, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. These skills are the essential conditions for one to be proficient in communication skills which employ language in the first place. Beginning with the first skill, that is listening, one of the most perceptible problems of the learners is to understand listening and hearing invariably without any sense of difference between the two. Secondly, particularly the underprivileged students of rural colleges hardly

find impeccable learning ambience for the reason that the teachers are not well trained in effective communication. If the teachers themselves are poor speakers of the language, the same will be received by the students. Thirdly, rural colleges suffer from tremendous lack of infrastructure needed to test the listening ability of the learners. And, fourthly, the physical and organisational barriers to effective communication are yet another problems suffered constantly by the underprivileged students of the rural colleges. To explain the barriers of communication affecting language learning situations, though, is not in the purview of the paper under discussion.

The skill of speaking is usually considered the benchmark of effective verbal communication in any language, let alone English. As a significant skill of language, it determines the competence of learning both L-1 and L-2. It is the index of one's linguistic understanding to a great extent. But when it comes to speaking English as a non-native speakers oral practices reveal the inconveniences and inabilities of the learners felt on account of the L-2's typically unphonetic characters. For example, one of the vendors, bemused by the youth's crowd in front of the UPSC office at Allahabad, a metropolitan city in southern part of U.P. state, asks a candidate eagerly with all his innocence: "Ye bheed koi *jaab* [pronunciation emphasized] ka hai ka?"(Trans. "**Has this crowd of youth flocked for a job?**") Totally puzzled by the pronunciation of the word job as /djab/, the candidate fails to understand the question and asks the vendor what he had asked. The vendor repeats the same pronunciation as many times as he was asked to repeat the question. And, finally, after much mental rigour, the linguistic sense prevailed upon the candidate and inferred the exact meaning of the question with the understanding of the word /djab/ as job, and he answered the vendor with much relief only "yes". The reason for the unintelligibility of the said word on the part of the candidate was his experience of the word with different meaning in his regional language in Bihar. /djab/ in many districts of Bihar is understood as a net of transparent fabric with a loose open weave placed on a calf's or a colt's mouth so as to prevent it from picking harmful garbage.

The illustration of regional interference in language learning doesn't end with the vendor's ignorance of the precision of the English phonetics. It emerges with still more trouble for the same candidate when he failed to figure out thrice one of the questions asked by the expert in the interview. He was actually startled to understand eventually that the expert was pronouncing *Aristotle* as '**I startle**'. The question of such phonetic anomalies prevails in abundance in a country like India with its multiple linguistic features.

Regional language influence not only tampers with the objective of correct communication but also at times results in ludicrous effects with possibility of precarious repercussion. Once the principal was on round in a public school when a teacher from Orrisa came up to one of his Bihari colleagues and cautioned him, "**Saar is coming**" His Bihari friend couldn't understand the meaning of "saar" as spoken by him. So he asked him to repeat what he said in order to ensure the correct word because "saar" means brother-in-law(sala) in colloquial conversations in many parts of Bihar. Here what the teacher was trying to say was "sir" through his regionally charged pronunciation, "saar".

Similarly, the phonetic peculiarity of southern states of India could be readily identified as reflected through their typically regional accent. To illustrate the point, a north Indian stepped into a mobile shop in Chennai to buy a mobile. At the time of billing, the shopkeeper asks the customer, "**Caisha kata?**" The customer was taken aback to understand the meaning as "**How fiercely have you bitten?**"(trans.) On the other hand, the shopkeeper while waiting for the price to be paid for the mobile was also getting irritated with the idea that the customer was wasting his time by not responding to his question. Ultimately, with the help of another customer, the north Indian customer got through the meaning of the question of the shopkeeper being, "How do you want to pay, through the cash or card?"

## III

Writing, though last in the list of linguistic skills, is not at all the least to be taken care of. Most of our linguistic accomplishments are subject to our success in writing skill. Writing as one of the verbal means of communication plays a pivotal role in developing the communication skill of a learner. The proper use of punctuation, grammatical accuracy and correctness of spelling are a select prerequisite for one to communicate effectively through one's writing. Precise use of diction is equally important for good and efficacious writing leading to proficient communication skill of the learner. But interestingly enough, the kind of English we are accustomed to write is sharp departure from the actual English usage prescribed for us to learn. Though, as already stated, Indian English is globally accepted with due regard and recognition, the series of illustrations that follow the discourse are just queer enough to ridicule the notion of learning English as a second or foreign language. In fact, as a result of factual evidence of speakers/users of English in the world including India in the first place therein outnumbering the native people of the language, the wide variety of Indian variants recognised as Indian English parallel with British or American English or Australian English amply travel through natural instance of literary narrative or with a view to signifying a particular cultural characteristics, as a black writer would often do to highlight his/her cultural circumstances. Consequently, the nomenclatures, Hinglish and *Inglish* (Indian+English) born of neologistic practices have emerged for Indian English. An Indian would rather say 'Let us discuss about the problem' instead of 'Let us discuss the problem'. Similarly, 'Why you did not speak the truth?' instead of 'Why didn't you speak the truth?' Both these examples are grammatically incorrect and their likes proliferate in Indian English usage. The following passage amply corroborates the usual Indian practices of English language daubed in Indian colour<sup>2</sup>:

"But it baffles me that you hear so many people saying round circle, study room, thin pointed needle and tall high rise building. Most Indians love to say Manomhan Uncle, Sonia Aunt, and Adwani Sir and not the other way round.

Instead of saying *going shopping*, some will say *going marketing*; an Indian politician once appealed to farmers to plant herbs in their *backsides*(backyards)! I have come across scores of Indians including teachers and journalists who instead of using the word *letterhead* invariably say *letter-pad*. It is always *dickey* and not the *boot of the car*. In Indian legal jargon, meanwhile, *lifer* is the word both for a life sentence and a person serving it. Headlines like '*The Accused Gets Lifer*' aren't uncommon in Indian newspapers.

New-generation Indians reared on a diet of the Internet when seeking agreement are inclined to end their interrogative sentences with *no* instead of a contracted negative. So you would hear "*Aishwarya Rai is stunningly beautiful, no?*" instead of "*Aishwarya Rai is stunningly beautiful isn't she?*"

The winds of change have also affected the Hindi film industry popularly known as Bollywood where producers churn out Hindi-English titles to attract cinema-goers. Movies like *Jab We Met* (When We Met), *Love Aaj Kal* (Love Today Tomorrow), *You Me Aur Hum* (You, I And We) and *Love Sex Aur Dhokha* (Love Sex And Betrayal) immediately come to mind.

Call it Indian English, Indianised English, Hinglish or the Indianisation of English as some people do it, it has its own charm. You may love it, laugh at it or even loathe it but you just cannot ignore the fact that it is here to stay. Ask the millions of Indians living all across the globe.(Harish Pandya, Macmillan Dictionary Blog)"

So, the question of *learning* English itself should be revisited in the light of the above-quoted reference. The fact that English has evolved through its variants world over has put the learners at crossroads where they are in a fix to decide whether they should *learn* language or *acquire* it. The *acquisition* of language gels with the mother tongue while *learning* corresponds to non-native language. The conflict of ambivalent position of English in India may be a recreational item for urban youth exposed to varied changes in language but the same is not true for rural youth who still struggle to 'learn' the language and not 'acquire' it.

#### IV

Regional intervention in learning an L-2 like English is superseded by the phonetic hurdles of the language itself. The phonetic oddities of the language still more trouble the learners in general and the underprivileged students of rural colleges in particular. India being a multilingual country has already its regional language intervention in learning a foreign language like English which abundantly contains words with their unusual spelling and their peculiarly funny pronunciations. The words such as lieutenant, colonel, bury, extempore, epitome, psychology, enough etc., a few to mention, the likes of which proliferate in English, pose constant obstacle for one eager to develop one's communication skills in the said language. The context evokes a past memory of one of my colleagues, who once shared his angst, though in a lighter vein, about the phonetic absurdity of the language. Referring to a particular example of the word, 'psychology', he expressed his frustration over the unnecessary use of the letter, 'p' in the word and accused for this the deliberate wicked intention of the upper classes to create such words to embarrass the underprivileged community of lower classes. George Bernard<sup>3</sup> Shaw too was much critical of the bizarre character of English language with respect to its dialectal variations unintelligible for the international readers. And, Maxmuller<sup>4</sup> went on to the extent of saying; "English spelling is a national misfortune to England and an international misfortune to the rest of the world"(quoted by Narasimha Rao).

The phonetic troubles could be evident from the fact that English has forty four sounds produced out of only twenty six letters. As many as eighteen sounds are, consequently, bound to create mess for the non-native learners who dream of becoming eloquent speaker of the language. One of the most shared examples of this fateful language is the word, '*ghoti*'<sup>5</sup> often illustrated hypothetically to point out the arbitrarily abstruse character of English phonetics. Any rural learner of the language from his miserable humble experience of the English spelling and its queer pronunciation would innocently figure out the pronunciation of the term being 'fish' with his memory of /f/ as in 'enough', /i/ as in 'women' and /ʃ/ as in 'nation' for the letters, 'gh', 'o' and 'ti' respectively. The phonetic character of the English language rules out to a great extent the possibility of consistent association of spellings and their pronunciations. Different pronunciations of the words like 'father' and 'gather', 'poor' and 'door', 'tour' and 'sour', 'move' and 'love', 'comb' and 'tomb' etc., again a few to mention, are highly preposterous without any phonetic justification. This has largely compelled the critics of phonetics to disclaim English as a phonetic language.

Given this kind of linguistic-phonetic complexities, the idea of learning English, particularly for developing speaking skills would be more of a fantasy than a fruitful reality. Even the urban so called educated youth with his impeccable grammatical competence and rich diction miserably fails to communicate exuding ludicrous effect in terms of the pronunciation of the typically strange words.

The problem is also considerably perceptible in 'speaking' as a linguistic skill of the learner. Speaking also simultaneously provides platform for the test of paralinguistic features so instrumental in efficacious communication. Paralinguistic features play an equally significant role in communication particularly observable in speaking being one of the important linguistic skills. Accent, pitch, rhythm and intonation are

the grave concerns of a good speaker. Any lapse in these features not only results in loss of communication but also in ludicrous and at times precarious effects. That is why a sincere speaker takes care of all the subtleties to ensure efficacious communication. For instance, a person attending a funeral ceremony of one of his/her close neighbours, utters the word of solace and grief but unfortunately does not care for the tone and pitch requisite for the seriousness of the occasion may land him in trouble creating an embarrassing situation for already aggrieved family. These features once maintained while speaking not only sound fascinating from linguistic perspective but also add to the efficacy and precision of communication intended. Apt use of pitch, intonation and stress results in glorious delivery of speech while the failure in the same not only leads to loss of communication but also at times culminates in ridiculous and precarious communication. If the pitch and intonation is not maintained by a student trying to join late in the class, his request with 'May I come in, sir?' will not only be turned down by the teacher but will also earn him some punishment for his rude and funny style of seeking entry into the classroom, while leaving his classmates engaged in lighter mood.

Learning English as an L2 in India is, thus, a profound experience. The profundity of experience in learning English is heightened even more by the complexities that entail upon it, that is, regional language interference in both oral and written practices of the non-native learners and phonetic anomalies of English language. Unfortunately both the problems would continue to be the grave challenges for learning English. To find a holistic ambience facilitated with latest infrastructures to promote impeccable learning of English in the hinterlands of the nation would be too optimistic. Hence, the fun generated through dialectal intervention will continue to result in bizarre truth of learning English in a non-native set up. To top it all, the eternal phonetic oddities of English as an L2 leave the non-native learners to cherish it as a language of fantasy rather than as a language worthy of precise learning.

### **Notes and References**

1. World Englishes comprises the varieties of English language spoken in different countries of the world. The typicality of such variants of English is determined by the socio-cultural and linguistic conditions of the place where they are spoken. *The most influential model of the spread of English is Braj Kachru's model of World Englishes. In this model the diffusion of English is captured in terms of three Concentric Circles of the language: The Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to English as it originally took shape and was spread across the world in the first diaspora. In this transplantation of English, speakers from England carried the language to Australia, New Zealand and North America. The Inner Circle thus represents the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English in regions where it is now used as a primary language: the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, anglophone Canada and South Africa, and some of Caribbean territories. English is the native language or mother tongue of most people in these countries. The total number of English speakers in the inner circle is as high as 380 million, of whom some 120 million are outside the United States.*

*The Outer Circle of English was produced by the second diaspora of English, which spread the language through imperial expansion by Great Britain in Asia and Africa. In these regions, English is not the native tongue, but serves as a useful lingua franca between ethnic and language groups. Higher education, the legislature and judiciary, national commerce and so on may all be carried out predominantly in English. This circle includes India, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Tanzania, Kenya, non-Anglophone South Africa, the Philippines (colonized by the US) and others. The total number of English speakers in the outer circle is estimated to range from 150 million to 300 million.*

Finally, the **Expanding Circle** encompasses countries where English plays no historical or governmental role, but where it is nevertheless widely used as a medium of international communication. This includes much of the rest of the world's population not categorized above: China, Russia, Japan, most of Europe, Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, etc. The total in this expanding circle is the most difficult to estimate, especially because English may be employed for specific, limited purposes, usually business English. The estimates of these users range from 100 million to one billion.

The inner circle (UK, US etc.) is 'norm-providing'; that means that English language norms are developed in these countries. The outer circle (mainly New Commonwealth countries) is 'norm-developing'. The expanding circle (which includes much of the rest of the world) is 'norm-dependent', because it relies on the standards set by native speakers in the inner circle. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Englishes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Englishes).)

2. Pandya, Haresh. *Indian English, Indianised English, Hinglish or the Indianisation of English*. August 30, 201025.04.2014. (<http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/25.06.2014>. at 10.00 p.m.)

3. G.B.Shaw's Pygmalion replete with dialectal language, particularly Cockney(London) is a radical example of linguistic variant causing inconvenience and unintelligibility for readers in general.

4. Rao, J.V.L.Narasimha. *Is English really the greatest language in the World?* Submitted on 28 November, 2009 at 11.56 p.m.(<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/25.06.2014> at 11.05p.m.)

5. **Ghoti** is a constructed word used to illustrate irregularities in English spelling

An early known published reference is in 1874, citing an 1855 letter that credits ghoti to one William Ollier Jr (born 1824). Ghoti is often cited to support the English spelling reform, and is often attributed to George Bernard Shaw, a supporter of this cause. However, the word does not appear in Shaw's writings, and a biography of Shaw attributes it instead to an anonymous spelling reformer.<sup>[3]</sup> Similar constructed words exist that demonstrate English idiosyncrasies, but ghoti is the most widely recognized. Linguists have pointed out that the location of the letters in the constructed word is inconsistent with how those letters would be pronounced in those placements, and that the expected pronunciation in English would be "goaty". For instance, the letters "gh" cannot be pronounced /f/ at the beginning of a syllable, and the letters "ti" cannot be pronounced /s/ at the end of a syllable. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/> 25.06.2014 at 11.10 p.m.)

6. The examples of phonetic incidents from 2 to 5 illustrated in the paper are the individual experiences of the writer of this paper.

7. Translations wherever added for the illustrations from individual experiences are of the writer himself.