

20th October 2006

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

In your meetings with the National Knowledge Commission, you have always stressed the importance of an inclusive society as the foundation for a knowledge society. This led us to reflect on the significance of language, not only as a medium of instruction or a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. We came to the conclusion that an understanding of, and a command over the English language, is perhaps the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. More often than not, teaching is in English. Even if it is not, in most subjects, books and journals are available only in English. And those who do not know English well enough, find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations.

This reality is not lost on our people, who recognize that the English language is a critical determinant of access to, and opportunities for a better life. Available information suggests that middle-income or lower-income households spend a large proportion of their modest income on sending their children to relatively expensive English medium schools. Such educational opportunities for children are a priority that is almost at par with health care for the family. But there are a very large number of people who simply do not have the resources for this purpose. The outcome is exclusion. We believe that inclusion is possible through public provision.

There is an irony in the situation. English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which makes for highly unequal access. Indeed, even now, no more than 1 per cent of our people use it as a second language, let alone a first language.

These realities cannot be changed overnight. But the National Knowledge Commission believes that the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. And we are convinced that action in this sphere, starting now, would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society. In just twelve years, it would provide our school leavers with far more equal access to higher education and, three to five years thereafter, much more equal access to employment opportunities.

We engaged in informal consultations on this subject with a wide range of people in government, academia, media and industry. We consulted some Chief Ministers in the states. We consulted Members of Parliament. We consulted people in professions such as medicine and law. We consulted civil society organizations. There was unanimity of views that this can and should be done. In order to work out the modalities in terms of

first steps, we also constituted a Working Group. The report submitted by this group was used as an input in our deliberations.

The National Knowledge Commission recommends that the teaching of English as a language should be introduced, along with the first language (either the mother-tongue or the regional language) of the child, starting from Class I in school. This phase of language learning should focus on using both languages to create meaningful learning experiences for the child without disproportionate emphasis on grammar and rules.

We recognize that nine States (of which six are in the north-east) and three Union Territories have already introduced English as a compulsory subject from Class I onwards. In addition, as many as twelve States and three Union Territories have made English a compulsory subject, at different stages in primary school, by Class V at the latest. However, the implementation is slow. The quality of English language teaching is simply not good enough. The support systems, such as the number of teachers or materials for teaching, are neither adequate nor appropriate. We are recommending a fundamental change that seeks to introduce, nationwide, the teaching of English as a language starting in Class I. This is not meant to be a stand-alone, add-on subject. It is meant to be integrated into the school curriculum.

Language learning cannot be separated from, and must be integrated with, content learning. Therefore, English should also be used to teach some non-language, content subjects, starting from Class III in school. The choice of subjects for this purpose can be left to schools depending on the proficiency of teachers and availability of materials. This would, in effect, create multi-medium schools. It would also help reduce the divide between English medium schools and regional languages medium schools.

The pedagogy of language learning as well as teaching should be suitably contextualized, to lend meaning to real situations and daily lives. Moreover, assessment should be based on proficiency rather than specifying achievement targets that reward mastery of single texts acquired through rote learning. To this end, a National Testing Service (NTS) for certification of language competence as well as recruitment of language teachers should be set up.

In order to meet the requirement for a large pool of English language teachers, graduates with high proficiency in English and good communication skills should be inducted without formal teacher-training qualifications. They could be selected through an appropriate procedure developed by the National Testing Service and then given a short-term orientation. Further, the nearly four million school teachers all over the country, regardless of their subject expertise, especially teachers at the primary level, should be trained to improve their proficiency in English through vacation training programmes or other short-term courses. Most teacher training programmes are not based on a real assessment of needs of teachers. Thus, the entire teacher training system catering to pre-service and in-service training that exists today, including training for language teaching, needs to be thoroughly reviewed, recognizing the centrality of language in the curriculum.

A multiplicity of English textbooks should be made available to address the diversity of English language environments in the country. However, to ensure that certain standards are maintained, benchmarks may be laid down for content of textbooks at each stage. For this purpose, an expert group should be set up to develop pedagogically sound English textbooks for every level, from Class I to XII. These should be used as models by states and made freely available on the web to allow easy access. While the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) may continue to be a nodal agency for textbook development for state board schools, the writing of textbooks needs to be decentralized further. To make the exercise more collaborative, civil society organizations with expertise in the domain should be involved in developing textbooks.

Since language learning takes place not only through direct instruction but also through assimilation from the environment, the classroom needs to be equipped with appropriate supplementary audio-visual and print material. Resource libraries could be set up in every classroom, comprising of a collection of books, magazines, newspapers, audio-visual material and posters, appropriate to the age of the students, on a variety of subjects. Language learning opportunities should also be created outside the class room through specific bi-lingual radio and TV channels, which could be introduced for formal and informal teaching and learning of English. Knowledge clubs could be formed to discuss and disseminate knowledge as well as extend the use of English outside the classroom. Given that language learning requires extensive resources, a centrally sponsored scheme of financial assistance for developing English language resources (teachers and materials) should be instituted to address this requirement.

State governments would need to be equal partners in the implementation of this idea. We therefore propose that the Prime Minister discuss this matter with all Chief Ministers at the next meeting of the National Development Council, to formulate a National Plan for the teaching of English as a language, in addition to the regional language, starting in Class I. This would also ensure that at the end of twelve years of schooling, every student is proficient in at least two languages.

Thank you and warm personal regards,

Sam Pitroda
Chairman,
The National Knowledge Commission

cc- Shri Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Dy. Chairman, Planning Commission