

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds



Medium of instruction: An audio-visual class for English in progress at Shri Madhavrao Bhagwat High School, a Marathi-medium school in Mumbai. Various studies, including a report by Nasscom, have show

## Will English become India's weakness?

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Pallavi Singh

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HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

**Topics**

Indian English | Language | India | Global economy | Education | Language Labs | EF Education First Asia  
| Audio story | Economy and Politics | Human Development

New Delhi: Inside a classroom in Mumbai's Vile Parle neighbourhood, eight-year-olds are intently listening to the sounds of English characters and words, and watching them take shape on a television screen.

A year ago, such classes weren't taking place at Shri Madhavrao Bhagwat High School, a Marathi-medium school run by Shilpa Abhyankar. That was when some parents approached her, requesting English classes for their children.

Amused initially, Abhyankar had to eventually give in. She hired Language Labs Inc., a Mumbai-based private language training institute, to teach English to primary section students at the school.

A not-so-quiet linguistic revolution is under way. Abhyankar's is just one of innumerable schools who are turning to English as either a full or a partial medium of education as demand for speakers of the "global language" surges nationwide.

Close

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds



Medium of instruction: An audio-visual class for English in progress at Shri Madhavrao Bhagwat High School, a Marathi-medium school in Mumbai. Various studies, including a report by Nasscom, have shown only 10-15% graduates are 'employable' in business services and only 26% engineers in technical services due to educational deficiencies.

Abhijit Bhatlekar / Mint

Intellectuals view English as the "link language" India needs to be on the same wavelength as other countries on a host of common global concerns.

But not everyone believes English is a cure-all. British linguist David Graddol argues in his soon-to-be-launched book *English Next India* that forcing primary school children to learn everything in a language that is not their mother tongue will only breed an under-educated generation. He recommends that English-medium teaching should begin only at the secondary level.

Historians see the introduction of English in India by British administrator Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835 as an attempt to create a class of interpreters to do business in the colony.

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

## Plugging the hole

Nonetheless, the spread of the language remains limited. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for 2009, released by Pratham—the largest non-governmental organization in the education sector— shows only 43.8% of students in class I could read the English alphabet, even in upper case.

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Plugging this hole is a central thrust of the government's skill development programme, which promotes the teaching of English in schools and colleges as a key vocational education component among other courses. For the programme that seeks to impart skill-based training to 500 million people by 2022, the government has also set up a national skill development board and a national skill development funding corporation for policy direction, review and finance.

At the Central Board of Secondary Education, the examination body for secondary schools in India, chairman Vineet Joshi says he receives most applications for affiliation from English-medium schools.

The Maharashtra state board embarked on starting semi-English medium schools in 2008 in response to growing demand, opting to teach science and mathematics in English at the secondary level.

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

English-medium teaching is often viewed as synonymous with private school education, and is thus reflected in the rising percentage of private school enrolments. According to ASER 2008, the percentage of rural children who studied in private primary schools went up from 16% in 2004 to 26% in 2008.

Government schools are also doing their best to gain ground. Abhyankar's school in Mumbai, for instance, runs audio-visual lessons for spoken English for classes III-V even though it is unable to provide headphones.

"We are a government school. This is not the ideal way, but this is better than nothing," says Abhyankar. Tea-ching English, she adds, would boost the confidence of her students, who are mostly from lower middle class and slums.

Graddol, however, told Mint he doesn't agree with the idea of teaching English at the cost of everything else.

### English's disadvantage

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

Graddol's coming book follows the evolution and reform of the English language in India. It will be released in March this year, a decade after his first book English Next.

The new book argues that the advantage offered by its large population of English speakers, which has given India an edge over other developing countries until now, will be neutralized in the coming years.

China has launched an English teaching programme and is likely to have more English speakers than India in a decade. In Russia, English has already become the working language. Even in Latin America and parts of Europe, Graddol says, English is now being seen as a basic skill, and India would get no special benefit once the language is spoken by everyone everywhere.

But the skewed focus on teaching English would mean a "half-baked education" for many Indians, and could see the country losing out to China, the linguist says.

**Podcast: Ming Chen, executive vice president of EF Education First Asia, talks about teaching and learning English in China**

[Download link here](#)

English Next India cites the example of Malaysia, where the government in July 2009 annulled an earlier decision to teach science and mathematics in English after

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

ASER reports, released annually since 2004, have also pointed out a drop in learning levels in schools. Various other studies, including a 2008 report by software lobby group Nasscom, have shown only 10-15% graduates are “employable” in business services and only 26% engineers in technical services due to educational deficiencies.

Graddol suggests using the mother tongue at the primary level and adopting English as a medium of instruction only at the secondary level to ensure that the learning process is meaningful.

He also says consolidating multilingualism could be India’s strength and recommends a three-language formula codified in 1968. The formula promoted primary education in the mother tongue and the teaching of English, Hindi as well as other regional languages at the secondary level.

HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

compared with English-medium schools has led to the closing down of several vernacular schools.

In Maharashtra too, the mushrooming of English-medium schools has caused a sharp decline in the number of Marathi-medium schools. In Pune, widely regarded as the cultural capital of the state, the number of Marathi-medium schools came down from 719 in 2006 to 604 in 2007, according to the Environment Status Report of 2008.

The Holy Family School in Andheri, Mumbai, which has both Marathi- and English-medium wings, has seen a steady fall in enrolment of students in the vernacular medium over the past five years.

Principal Francis Swamy recalls children whose fathers farmed their lands or had occupations such as driving buses and autorickshaws, and mothers who worked in households as maids. Yet, when many of them pulled their children out of the Marathi-medium wing of Swamy's school, they only moved to an English-medium school. "Such is the craze for English that it cuts across class," Swamy says.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education in India, drafted in 2005, also makes a strong pitch for multilingualism. States where English is not the official language have largely seen government-run schools adopt regional languages as the medium of instruction, even as private schools have taught in English.



HOME

LATEST

TRENDING

MY READS

Budget 2020

Market Dashboard

Companies

Markets

Podcasts

Money

Start-ups

Mutual Funds

But Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit activist and poet who teaches English at Anna University in Chennai, sees a larger role for English in Indian society—one of a link language.

“Today, people all over the world face similar problems— terror, violence, exploitation —and they need to learn and understand from each other’s resistance struggles,” she says. “They are all different stories, but they are also extremely similar. If you have to say these stories simultaneously, you would be using English.”

In Part 2 of the series, read about the politics of language.

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