

C.H.E.T.N.A – A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND PROFICIENCY DEVELOPMENT THAT IS PPLICABLE IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA AND OTHER DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The English language commands an increasingly important role in the second decade of the 21st century. Many great works of English Literature have inspired generations of creative artists not just in the discipline of creative writing but also in the fields of art, music and filmmaking. The Information Technology and telecommunications revolutions would not have gathered the astounding pace they acquired during the past 30 years were it not for the availability of English as a common language for communication, learning, coding and development. As the forces of change accelerate and hundreds of millions of young workers from developing countries are set to join the global workforce the importance of English will only increase. It is towards this objective that I have developed the framework for English language education and proficiency called C.H.E.T.N.A. that English language education must be 1) Communicated Oriented, 2) Holistic, 3) Employment Generating, 4) Technology Driven, 5) Non Discriminatory and, 6) Artistic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language commands an increasingly important role in the second decade of the 21st century. As we look at the forces of societal transformation around us – globalization, automation, connectivity, mobility and virtual workplaces and workforces – the importance of communication through a common link language have never been greater and will only continue to grow. Societies cannot progress without imbibing the lessons of history and building on the foundations of human advancement. Much of the recorded history and documentation of progress in medicine, science and technology is in the English Language. Many great works of English Literature have inspired generations of creative artists not just in the discipline of creative writing but also in the fields of art, music and film making. The Information Technology and telecommunications revolutions would not have gathered the astounding pace they acquired during the past 30 years were it not for the availability of English as a common language for communication, learning, coding and development. As the forces of change accelerate and hundreds of millions of young workers from developing countries are set to join the global workforce the importance of English will only increase. It is therefore vital for governments in developing countries to adopt a proactive and comprehensive approach towards English language education and proficiency development or else they risk being left in the global race for talent pool driven investments and economic growth. Today, when an international bank based in Wall Street, New York USA is able to communicate through English with an IT services firm in Chennai, India and a Call Center company in Manila, Philippines the power of the language as a multiplier of value is clearly evident. The language has made previously unimagined connections possible. It has helped secure long term employment opportunities and helped millions transcend social barriers and acquire upward social mobility. And most importantly it has helped position countries well in the minds of investors, corporations and institutions whose precious, but finite, capital is being courted by governments in increasingly demanding democracies to deliver on growth, employment and infrastructure. For countries like India it is close to seven decades after independence and to look at language from a colonial prism would be foolhardy. Earlier, English was earlier seen as a force of oppression by the manipulative colonizer. Today, it must be seen as a tool for self-advancement by the assertive citizen. Nowhere is this more visible than in the dusty city of Gurgaon in Haryana state that borders the national capital of Delhi. In a state where females

have traditionally faced entrenched gender based discrimination English proficiency has helped thousands of young women to join the IT-call center revolution and through financial independence escape the clutches of impoverished patriarchy. As Haryana struggles with the challenges of stagnating agricultural yields, rising unemployment and lagging infrastructure growth - problems faced by majority of developing countries from the Congo to Indonesia- an important part of the development solution must be the development of skills and proficiencies that can help the youth become more employable in the global marketplace. One of these core skills and proficiencies is English and its importance and relevance will keep on increasing as the services sector strengthens its dominant position in the economy. Already contributing more than 50pct of GDPs of many developing countries it is critical to growth since it encompasses key sectors like telecommunications, information technology, hospitality, tourism, healthcare, banking, financial services, airlines, public transportation etc.

Unfortunately, the attempts at developing English education and proficiency by the government have been ad hoc at best. Inadequate funding, absence of qualified teachers, excessive tinkering with curriculums, opposition of myopic cultural chauvinists and failure to fully appreciate the role of English in helping India become a BRICS power, have resulted in uneven spread of English education in India. Vast segments of the country's population still lack proficiency in English even in highly literate states like Kerala. The quality of written and spoken English is very uneven and the failure of government aided schools and institutes of higher learning to upgrade and update have exacerbated class divides between the well to do urban English speaking middle classes and struggling lower sections in semi urban and rural areas. This imbalance needs to be redressed as education has been seen to be the great equalizer in India and indeed four of India's tallest founding fathers and visionaries of an India with free and equal access to opportunity for all – Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel and Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar – were all proficient in English and expounded many of their inspirational messages in the English language apart from being fluent in their own native tongues. Since independence many Indian thinkers, writers, businessmen, professionals, scientists, doctors, academicians and others have left their mark internationally in part due to their proficiency of the English language. But by some estimates only about 20 pct of India's 1.2 billion population possesses a reasonable degree of language proficiency. For India's growth to be equitable a similar access and training must be provided to the remaining 80 pct and this requires a comprehensive, well thought out and practical approach.

2. C.H.E.T.N.A

It is towards this objective that I have developed the framework for English language education and proficiency called C.H.E.T.N.A. In the following paragraphs I will expound on the six critical facets of this framework that are Communication Oriented, Holistic, Employment Generating, Technology Driven, Non Discriminatory and Artistic. The word 'Chetna' is derived from Sanskrit and it means intellectual awareness which I believe is essential when designing and implementing a comprehensive framework for English language education and proficiency development.

The *first* facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Communication Oriented**. The children and youth of tomorrow will live in communication dominant societies and therefore reading, writing and spoken language proficiency is critical. And none of these is possible without comprehension. Does the child understand what she is reading or speaking? Does the youth comprehend what he is writing or is he just indulging in copy-paste or short form babble of the kind popularized by gadget centric formats like Twitter, Facebook etc. A language cannot be learnt by rote and the more the communication orientated nature of teaching and proficiency building the more effective the outcomes. Communication oriented learning also helps improve usage of tone, body language, pronunciation and presentation abilities that substantially enhance impact of the content. Communication oriented education also requires usage of a wider range of teaching aids such as videos, movies and documentaries that will complement the learning experience.

The second facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Holistic**. As has been noted in several studies early childhood is the ideal time for exposure to language especially a non-native one. Unfortunately, for too many Indians these early years are lost and trying to play catch later with weekly classes, tuitions or private language programs is both expensive and at times seen to be not fully effective. However, pressure from middle class parents and the demands of the job market have pushed schools across India to address this gap and English language is becoming a core subject from primary school onwards. These foundation programs are paying dividend as seen in India's rank of 20 in terms of English Language proficiency according to English First EPI rankings 2015 which are much higher than Vietnam (29), Indonesia (32), Russia (39), Brazil (41), China (47) and Thailand (62). For a country intent on becoming an IT superpower India must target a top 10 ranking and learn from the achievements of countries ranking higher than it such as Sweden and Singapore. Once foundation level proficiency is developed it needs to be strengthened in middle and senior schools and enhanced in polytechnics, colleges and universities through mandatory classes and testing.

The third facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Employment Generating**. The phenomenon of unemployable graduates or underemployed graduates due to lack of skills and competencies required by prospective employers has reached crisis proportions in developing countries. In an overcrowded 7 billion human being planet with growing trend of computers and robotic machines replacing humans in many jobs, it is vital that education enhances not only the quest for learning, knowledge and discovery but also addresses the question of employability. As we have noted above English language proficiency and skills are mandatory for workers in a global workplace. It is therefore imperative that curriculums and methodologies focus not just on concepts but also on practical applications and the needs of companies and institutions. For example concepts of traditional grammar need to be balanced with training on report writing and service oriented speaking.

The fourth facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Technology Driven**. Technology has become the game changer across several facets of our life including in education where it has made access to vast tomes of knowledge access to the remotest of the remote at the click of a button. Where before once a bookshelf stored dozens of books now a single electronic reader can store thousands of e-articles and books accessible anywhere at any time. Computerization of schools and linking up through high speed telecommunications connectivity must be prioritized on an urgent basis. For once done students will be able to leapfrog disadvantages and use initiative and drive to improve. It is also important for schools to use technology to connect students with language experts. Imagine the inspiration and excitement if the storytelling and interpreting experience can be delivered through connectivity with some of India's famous English language writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Ruskin Bond, Vikram Seth and others.

The fifth facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Non Discriminatory**. This means that the current branding of the language as 'elitist' due to high cost, exclusivity and limited access needs to be urgently rectified. Basic proficiency in English like that in Mathematics, Sciences and Humanities must become accessible to all citizens. This will require the training of large numbers of good quality English teachers for schools and colleges and a sensible way to start would be to collaborate with the UK, USA, Australia and Canada for teacher training programs under government to government cooperation. A special thrust must be made in rural, semi urban and urban slum areas where many students are deprived of quality education. Non-discriminatory also means advancing English education with India's old and great languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Urdu, Bengali, Odiya, Marathi, Gujarati, Gurbani among many others. The three language formula – English, Hindi and state language – will not only produce more employable graduates but also more integrated citizens. The sixth facet of the C.H.E.T.N.A framework is that English language education and proficiency must be **Artistic**. Languages have long sparked creativity and exploration. The fact that VS Naipaul, son of Indian immigrants to the West Indies, can uniquely adapt the English language to advance his creativity resulting in his

winning the Nobel Prize for Literature highlights the power of the language in providing an unlimited medium for intellectual curiosity.

3. CONCLUSION

Already India as a nation is one of the largest market for books and periodicals in English. Greater proficiency will help make further contributions to the creative achievements of a nation famed for its art, literature, dance, music and architecture. And inspire greater contributions to a language that was uniquely imbibed and adapted by a country renowned for its ability to assimilate.