English as a National Foreign Language in India

India has two national languages for central administrative purposes: Hindi and English. Hindi is the national, official, and main link language of India. English is an associate official language. The Indian Constitution also officially approves twenty-two regional languages for official purposes.

Dozens of distinctly different regional languages are spoken in India, which share many characteristics such as grammatical structure and vocabulary. Apart from these languages, Hindi is used for communication in India. The homeland of Hindi is mainly in the north of India, but it is spoken and widely understood in all urban centers of India. In the southern states of India, where people speak many different languages that are not much related to Hindi, there is more resistance to Hindi, which has allowed English to remain a lingua franca to a greater degree.

Since the early 1600s, the English language has had a toehold on the Indian subcontinent, when the East India Company established settlements in Chennai, Kolkata, and Mumbai, formerly Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay respectively. The historical background of India is never far away from everyday usage of English. India has had a longer exposure to English than any other country which uses it as a second language, its distinctive words, idioms, grammar and rhetoric spreading gradually to affect all places, habits and culture.

In India, English serves two purposes. First, it provides a linguistic tool for the administrative cohesiveness of the country, causing people who speak different languages to become united. Secondly, it serves as a language of wider communication, including a large variety of different people covering a vast area. It overlaps with local languages in certain spheres of influence and in public domains.

Generally, English is used among Indians as a 'link' language and it is the first language for many well-educated Indians. It is also the second language for many who speak more than one language in India. The English language is a tie that helps bind the many segments of our society together. Also, it is a linguistic bridge between the major countries of the world and India.

English has special national status in India. It has a special place in the parliament, judiciary, broadcasting, journalism, and in the education system. One can see a Hindi-speaking teacher giving their students instructions during an educational tour about where to meet and when their bus would leave, but all in English. It means that the language permeates daily life. It is unavoidable and is always expected, especially in the cities.

The importance of the ability to speak or write English has recently increased significantly because English has become the de facto standard. Learning English language has become popular for business, commerce and cultural reasons and especially for internet communications throughout the world. English is a language that has become a standard not because it has been approved by any 'standards' organization but because it is widely used by many information and technology industries and recognized as being standard. The call centre phenomenon has stimulated a huge expansion of internet-related activity, establishing the future of India as a cyber-technological super-power. Modern communications, videos, journals and newspapers on the internet use English and have made 'knowing English' indispensable.

The prevailing view seems to be that unless students learn English, they can only work in limited jobs. Those who do not have basic knowledge of English cannot obtain good quality jobs. They cannot communicate efficiently with others, and cannot have the benefit of India's rich social and cultural life. Men and women who cannot comprehend and interpret instructions in English, even if educated, are unemployable. They cannot help with their children's school homework everyday or decide their revenue options of the future.
A positive attitude to English as a national language is essential to the integration of people into Indian society. There would appear to be virtually no disagreement in the community about the importance of English language skills. Using English you will become a citizen of the world almost naturally. English plays a dominant role in the media. It has been used as a medium for inter-state communication and broadcasting both before and since India's independence. India is, without a doubt, committed to English as a national language. The impact of English is not only continuing but increasing.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Comprehension Questions

Q1 - According to the writer, the Indian constitution recognises

A. 22 official languages.
B. Hindi as the national language.
C. 2 national, official languages.
D. 2 national languages.

Q2 - English's status as a lingua franca is helped by

A. its status in northern India.
B. the fact that it is widely understood in urban centres.
C. the fact that people from the south speak languages not much related to Hindi.
D. it shares many grammatical similarities with Hindi.

Q3 - In paragraph 3, 'toehold' means that English

A. dominated India.
B. changed the names of some cities in India.
C. has had a presence in India.
D. has been in India longer than any other language.

Q4 - Hindi-speaking teachers

A. might well be heard using English.
B. only use English.
C. only use English for instructions.
D. do not use English.

Q5 - In paragraph eight, it says 'the prevailing view', which suggests that

A. the view is correct.
B. the view is held by the majority.
C. the view is incorrect.
D. the view is held by the minority.

Q6 - English in India

A. is going to decrease.
B. has decreased since independence.
C. causes disagreement.
D. is going to have a greater importance.

LIVEWORKSHEETS