Chapter V

STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS ENGLISH IN ASSAM

English today is representative of quality in education and ensures a greater participation in national and international life. The opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s brought about a surge in the demand for English in the schools because English is perceived to open up a host of opportunities. English is now a common language for communication almost all over the world. English is now so widespread and considered so influential that the 'BANA' countries (Britain and the Australasian and North American nations) which use English as their first language, are often charged with hegemony.  

ENGLISH AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASSAM

Assam is a multilingual state like the rest of the Indian states. The state has adopted a Three Language Formula in its education system. English is here the associate official language along with its regional counterpart, Assamese language. However a number of different languages like Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Bihari and other indigenous languages like Bodo, Mising, Kachari, Tiwa are also spoken here.

In terms of education, Guwahati holds centre stage as students from all over the north-east converge here to enroll themselves into various institutes of higher education. The premier institutions in the state are the Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University, Assam Medical College, Jorhat Medical College, Assam Engineering College and Jorhat Engineering College. In the
Higher Education sector the cream of the filling was the establishment of IIT at Guwahati with its sprawling campus and the two Central Universities situated at Tezpur and Silchar. Recently the Don Bosco University and the Kaziranga University has also been established.

It was after the Charter Act of 1833 that changes were brought about in the education system of Assam in favour of English education. It was David Scott, Agent to the then Governor General for the whole eastern frontier, whose plan it was to establish one English school at Guwahati so that the products from the school could be absorbed as clerks in the administrative service. The Christian Missionaries opened one school in Guwahati. It was through the efforts of Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam (1834-61) that "The Gauhati English School" was opened in 1835.

School education is provided at three levels i.e. primary, secondary and Higher Secondary schools. In these vernacular medium schools English is taught as a subject. Till the 1990's English was introduced in Class V. Later on it was introduced in Class III and currently it is introduced in Class I. It remains a compulsory subject till Class X. It is then studied for a further two years at the +2 stage or the Higher Secondary level.

Thus it is seen that in the Assamese medium schools English is taught as a subject for XII years. But there is still an extremely low level of proficiency in the language amongst the students. This is in marked contrast to students coming from or studying in English medium schools. In these private institutions
English is taught as a subject and at the same time it also happens to be the medium of instruction. In fact Assam boasts of some excellent English medium schools like "The Assam Valley", "Delhi Public School", "Carmel School", "Sarala Birla Gyan Jyoti" to name a few.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Asking students of both Assamese medium and English medium schools as well as college level students what they think of English and English learning may seem trivial. Being a compulsory subject they have to attend English classes. Whether or not they enjoy being there is irrelevant to their obligation.

The primary motivation for students' studying English is because Schools require it, and the attitudes towards studying decline as the material increases in difficulty. This is truer for students of Assamese medium schools because here English is taught as a subject. For students of English medium schools, the situation is slightly different. Here it is observed that students might not be very aware about the rules of English grammar but are able to converse in English. Again dislike for the subject does not necessarily entail that they do not listen to pop songs or do not watch English movies. Many also nurture a desire to live overseas someday.

There is a duality in Assamese students in the sense that student with potentially negative attitudes towards English as a subject may have certain hidden interests in English which may not be very apparent. Thus at times it is
seen that some students yearn to speak English fluently though not very inclined
towards studying their text books. Again some are quite interested in composing
poems in English.

THE GOAL OF THE STUDY AND QUESTIONNAIRE CONSTRUCTION

The goal of conducting a sample survey amongst 100 students
belonging to Higher Secondary First Year was to gain specific insight into
their attitudes towards the subject English. The present study focuses on
student attitudes and also encompasses other elements such as interest, desire
and perception.

At times it is noticed that teachers' become frustrated with having to
teach English within the confines of centralized curricula to students who are
as aware as the teachers themselves that they do not need the language other
than for examination purpose. This is a distinction which is normally made
between "ESL" (English as a second language) and "EFL" (English as a foreign
language). "ESL" normally refers to a learning situation where an immediate
communicative need for English exists outside the classroom, and "EFL"
refers to relatively little immediate communicative need, although its study
maybe a requirement and qualification and/or ability with it maybe highly valued.

Kachru and Nelson illustrates the ways and degree to which English
functions in the society of various countries with a model of three concentric
circles.⁴
In this model, the English language is:

a. the dominant mainstream language of 'inner circle' countries (e.g. Australia, Britain, the United States, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand);

b. has at least some communicative role in the mainstream societies of 'outer circle' countries (e.g. Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, India); and

c. has little or no communicative role but maybe highly regarded and widely studied in 'expanding circle' countries (e.g. China, Korea, Japan).

Gorlach points out that in countries in which English is a native language, societies have used English for various functions, whereas in countries like India, in which English has been a second language, a foreign language, it has
been restricted to the domains of administration, law and parts of education and the media, some forms of literature, other uses of language being reserved to the mother tongue.\textsuperscript{5}

Kachru's 'inner circle' refers to the areas where English is the native or first language. The 'outer circle' covers the regions colonized by Britain. In these countries English plays an important "second language" role in a multilingual setting (India, Singapore, Malawi). A colony-into-nation state "In Zimbabwe the status of native languages is deteriorating and English language is fast growing. English "impacted the native languages of Zimbabwe in the following aspects: school instruction, social and economic status, prestige, power, the job market, communication, the media, political administration and culture.\textsuperscript{6} Similar is the case of the Federation of Nigeria which has made English its official language. The 'expanding circle' countries do not have any history of colonization but they recognize the importance of English. South Korea which has now gained the name of 'Miracle on Han River' due to its remarkable economic development recognizes the importance of English. English education has become an integral part of South Korea's national desire. This is linked to its aim of trying to become the hub of international finance of the region. They feel that by using English freely as a 'lingua franca' will result in greater foreign investment in their country. Similar is the case with Japan where English is now used for intranational communication.

In Assam students be it at the school or college level are required to
study English in a social environment where there is little immediate need or opportunity to use the language for communicative purposes. Moreover the entire concept of studying English is oriented towards preparing students for examinations. Except for the English medium schools the English learning environment in the schools of Assam is not set up to foster communicative ability.

This being the background of the English learning situation it was felt that it would be interesting to get to know how students would respond to a questionnaire designed to learn about their attitudes and interests in the language.

CONSIDERATIONS IN QUESTIONNAIRE CONSTRUCTION

- The format of this particular questionnaire has been kept very simple. Instead of the Seven Point Likert Scale, the 'Yes' or 'No' format has been introduced.
- When wording the statements care was taken to write the questions so that they could be easily understandable. This was done in order to avoid confusion and keeping in mind the target group.
- The questionnaire response time was kept within a 10 minute time frame to ensure that classes were not hampered.

THE TARGET GROUP

The target group was students belonging to the Higher Secondary
First Year class. This particular group was selected as they are the upcoming
generation and their responses would reflect the attitude of the young generation.
Most of the respondents were from Assamese medium background.

The two colleges (one a Junior College) are located in the town of
Sonari in Sivasagar district. One of the colleges is 'Sonari College' and the
other institution is 'Sonari Junior College' which is a fairly new endeavour.
Despite 'Sonari' being classified as a 'town', it has a fairly 'rural' environment.

This group of students is more distanced than their peers in larger
cities from foreign elements-native speakers of English, foreign-related festivals
or events or language schools. Their exposure to the English language outside
the classroom is limited to what they see on television, or hear in popular
English songs. Some students are proficient in computers and are therefore
familiar with the internet. However most students do not have regular access
to the internet and do not have their own personal computers.

CATEGORICAL STRUCTURE OF QUESTIONNAIRE USED IN THIS
SURVEY

Category 1: Attitudes towards English as a subject (11 questions)
Category 2: Attitudes towards extracurricular English (12 questions)
Category 3: Parental influence in the study of English (3 questions)
Category 4: Use of English in daily life (4 questions)
Category 5: English and western culture (2 questions)
Category 6: Need for English in the future (2 questions)
Category 7: Disadvantages of monolingualism albeit advantages of multilingualism (3 questions)

*Attitudes towards English as a subject:* This category refers to the desire to study this language. The 11 questions comprising it refer to positive or negative attitudes towards the actual studying of this language. The questions cover issues relating to proficiency, aptitude, interest and inclination towards the subject.

*Attitudes towards extracurricular English:* This category of questions attempts to elicit the degree to which students are interested in the English they encounter outside the classroom. In a setting like Sonari students were less likely to have an immediate contact with any outside culture or event. In fact they are more likely to be influenced by the media including TV programmes, movies and popular music.

*Parental influence in the study of English:* This category has been introduced in order to examine any possible correlation between parental influence and interest or disinterest in the subject. It may be said that in a rural environment like Sonari parents might not have any immediate contact with this language and therefore might not attach any special value to it.

*Use of English in daily life:* This category attempts to examine whether this language has any perceived utility in the day to day affairs of students. Considering the background of the respondents the study aimed at finding out whether they used this language and if difficulty in expression was the reason behind minimal or restricted use of this language.
English and western culture: The influence of western culture is on the rise in the state. This category aimed at examining if students perceived any relation between the English language and an English medium education with western culture.

Need for English in the future: This category aimed at studying whether students' aspirations and goals or aims tallied with their need for this language in the future. Their outlook towards securing a job within the state or outside is also examined.

Disadvantages of monolingualism albeit advantages of multilingualism: Assam is a multilingual state. As such the survey attempted to examine what views the students nurtured about both monolingualism and multilingualism. Apart from their mother tongue most students do know a spattering of Hindi and English. A positive response to multilingualism would perhaps see a rise in second language or foreign language learning.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

For this survey 100 questionnaires were distributed and 100 were returned. All the questionnaires included responses to all the 37 questions. An attempt has been made to treat the data holistically, in terms of positive and negative response. The results of the questionnaire have been presented in terms of total student response. This analysis is a qualitative treatment of the data gathered in a quantitative way.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tabulating the data from 100 questionnaires was no easy task. But it was interesting watching the figures emerge from each questionnaire question. What came to light was the fact that the data revealed no overall negativity towards the English language.

Following is a discussion of the salient responses within each of the seven categories in the questionnaire. The results have been presented by 'category' and by 'question' along with an analysis and commentary.

Table 14

Category 1: Attitudes towards English as a subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Are you interested in studying English?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do you feel the subject English should be made optional?</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Is English your weakest subject?</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are you scared of your English class?</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you understand what is taught in your English class?</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you study your English textbooks at home?</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Do you speak in English with your English teacher?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Do you pay attention in your English class?</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Do you ask questions when you do not understand something in class?</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Do you get nervous in English class?</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Do you try and answer questions asked in the class?</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The overall responses to this category show a positive trend towards English as a subject. The response to question 1 shows complete affirmation to the idea of ’studying’ English. It is interesting to note the negative response to question 6. Considering the fact that majority of the students struggle with this language it came as a big surprise that 63% of the respondents felt that English should be retained as a compulsory subject and not made optional. This shows that many students place a great deal of value on the study of English. This positive response comes despite the fact that they really have no choice in the matter and majority of the students lack competency and communicative ability in the subject.

The responses to question 7 and question 8 show an almost similar response. On a personal front a positive response was expected but the negative response to these two questions was very encouraging. Fear is one factor that can stall the learning abilities of a student. It was felt that majority of the respondents would agree to English being their weakest subject. But here this assumption was proved wrong.

Question 9 and question 13 came up with highly positive response. Contrary to popular belief students agree to the fact that they have no problem comprehending whatever is taught in class neither do they suffer from any aversion to reading their English text books at home. As far as question 15 is concerned a whopping 98% has agreed to paying attention and only a meager 2% has admitted to not paying attention in class.
The positive response to question 23 is quite intriguing. This is a problem faced by majority of students in the state of Assam. Clarification of doubts is what they shy away from. This problem is not actually linked with their liking or disliking the subject. The society of Assam can be said to be conservative and being products of this society they tend to be introverts. Question 24 has come up with a 69% response in the affirmative. Nervousness in class could be attributed to the fact that most students lack communicative ability and are unable to speak the language fluently. This perhaps is one reason why students tend to keep a low profile in class and answer with great temerity when asked any question. In contrast to this question 25 has come up with a positive response. 82% of the respondents agree to answering questions in class.

A low positive response came in to question 14. Here only 26% agreed to conversing in English with their teacher. This again can be due to their lack of fluency or simply because in a multilingual situation one has the tendency to 'switch codes' or revert back and forth between their mother tongue any other language they are comfortable in.

In spite of being a mandatory subject the students involved in this present study do not harbor any negative feelings towards this subject and neither do they feel that this subject is being 'imposed' on them.
Question 2 came up with a negative response. This shows that students prefer to read the newspaper in their mother tongue. This could also be due to the fact that only the local newspaper in Assamese is available at home. Question 3 however shows a completely positive trend with 77% of the respondents interested in joining a 'Spoken English' class. These classes focus on developing fluency or communicative ability. This can be linked up with

Table 15

Category 2: Attitudes towards extracurricular English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you read English Newspapers?</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Would you like to join a ‘Spoken English’ class?</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you think knowledge of English will help you get a job</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you like watching English movies?</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Do you like watching programmes telecast in the English language?</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Are you afraid of making mistakes when speaking in English?</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Are you interested in speaking English fluently?</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Should advertisements in English be banned?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Would you like to learn English beyond what is taught in class and in the text books?</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. If you have brothers or sisters, are they interested in learning English or any other foreign language?</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Do you feel people who know and speak English well are more confident?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Do you write emails in English to friends?</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
question 17 where 88% of the students said they wanted to speak English fluently. The respondents not only show a positive image towards speaking English well but are also willing to take efforts to actualize that goal. In the response to question 4 it is noticed that 85% of the respondents agree that knowledge of English would help them secure a job. This is probably the reason that they are willing to go the extra mile in order to enhance their job potential.

Question 10 shows a positive response. This means that students are able to catch on to whatever is going on in the movie. However there is need to treat this question with caution because students might watch dubbed versions of the movies. Again most movies come in with sub-titles. But then again it is observed that question 11 has brought in a positive response. Their interest in English programmes will not only help them develop their vocabulary but also help them to think outside the box. Classroom environment tends to get monotonous and watching English programmes might prove beneficial in the long run. There is the yearning to look beyond the classroom and this is evident in the positive response to question 27.

The positive response to question 16 is indicative of the fact that the fear of making mistakes and being made fun of is proving to be a great deterrent as far as speaking English is concerned. It can be assumed that there is no aversion to the language as such and if they can master communicative ability they will have no qualms about using this language.
The negative response to question 21 is very interesting. Majority of the respondents feel that advertisements in English should not be banned. Thus they would like to see public notices, signs and advertisements in English. However advertisements in the regional language will also no doubt be welcomed.

The response to question 35 indicates majority of the siblings of the respondents were interested in learning English. Thus as far as the young generation is concerned they all show an affinity for the language. Maybe this is because they realize the implications and importance of knowing a Global language.

Question 36 has brought in a moderately positive response at 59%. The general feeling is that students from English medium schools have a superiority complex. But here it is seen that students do not feel strongly about this. Confidence levels perhaps have nothing to do with knowing English. It is actually the ability to communicate well and get across to the other person that matters. Knowledge of a subject and communication skills put together would boost confidence levels in a person.

Question 37 has come up with an almost 50-50 response. Most students today are computer savvy but majority are not really into mailing each other. They prefer the SMS mode, chatting apps like Whatsapp and BBM and using the social networking sites like Facebook.

Overall, in this category a positive response towards learning
English is observed. In spite of belonging to rural environment students feel that there is a need for this subject.

**Table 16**

**Category 3: Parental influence in the study of English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Do your parents encourage you to study English?</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Do your parents feel that being able to speak English is important for your future?</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Do your parents speak English well?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In analyzing the responses to this category it is seen that the response to question 34 leans towards the negative side. This was expected considering the background of the students. But despite the fact that most parents lacked communicative ability they did encourage their children to study English. Here a 99% response in the affirmative is observed. Most parents perhaps felt that knowledge of English would bear fruit for their children. In this category too, a positive attitude towards the subject is observed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. Would you like to speak in English with any non-Assamese person?</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Do you speak in English with your friends?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Do you speak English at home?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Do you find it difficult to express your thoughts in English?</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 22 shows a near 50-50 response to the idea of directly interacting with a non-Assamese person. This hesitation on the part of the respondents can be linked up with the positive response (79%) to question 31. Majority of the respondents face difficulty in expressing their thoughts in English. However it is not clear what language they would prefer to interact in. When speaking with a non-Assamese person who happens to be an Indian they might try speaking in Hindi, the national language. But if the person belongs to the international community they will perhaps be left with no other option other than English.

The response to question 29 and question 30 show a negative response indicating the fact that within the confines of the family circle or the friend circle it is the mother tongue which rules.

Overall, the responses to this category show that in day to day
communication the respondents do not have much use of this language. In a multilingual situation it is expected that a number of languages will be used for communication.

Table 18

Category 5: English and western culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32. Is English language solely responsible for bringing in western culture into our state?</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Does an English medium education develop attraction towards western culture?</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The negative response to question 32 shows that the respondents do not really link up English language and western culture. The media would perhaps be held more responsible for this. Question 33 brought in a near 50-50 response. The design of the curriculum would here come into play. The medium being English does not necessarily mean that western culture is being followed. Indian culture or more specifically the culture of Assam can be incorporated into the course curriculum.
Table 19

Category 6: Need for English in the future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With original questionnaire no.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Would you like to work outside Assam?</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Is there any need of the English language in your future?</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The response to question 18 is definitely in the affirmative. 87% of the respondents would like to work outside Assam. The respondents are not averse to the idea of moving out of the state. They are well aware of the fact that the moment they move outside Assam they will need a common medium of communication. In the North Indian states Hindi is a convenient option but when one moves down to South India it will be more convenient to converse in English as Hindi is not in vogue over there. It can thus be said that for the respondents English will definitely be fruitful for their future.
Table 20

Category 7: Disadvantages of monolingualism albeit advantages of multilingualism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you feel speaking only Assamese is a disadvantage?</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Do you speak any other language other than Assamese?</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Do you think being able to speak both Assamese and English can be a great advantage?</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 5 also reveals a 50-50 response from the participants. The target group is very young and perhaps majority of the respondents have not had any exposure to life outside Assam. Question 19 shows a positive response as most of the respondents are familiar with languages like Bengali or Hindi. In question 28 an 84% positive response is observed. In a rural environment people are normally monolingual but it is heartening to see the respondents emerging from this background and realizing the benefits of knowing more than one language and when the second language is English it has its uses be it securing a job, sourcing information from the internet or just plain communication.

Reference

1. Moritoshi, Paul: "Perspectives on the role of English as an
2. Mahanta, Bobby: *College Education in Assam*. Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 2011, p.52

3. Ibid., p 52

4. Kachru, Braj: *Asian Englishes*: Beyond the Canon. HongKong University Press, HongKong, 2005, p. 94

