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The Question Of English

The recent government decision to start the teaching of English two years earlier in school is welcome as a sign of the growing realization in administrative circles that something needs to be done to check the deterioration in the standard of English which has resulted from years of deliberate neglect. But this measure will not go far enough. Nor is it a big change from existing practice in most private institutions where, despite administrative directives to the contrary, English has continued to be taught from the primary level. But that did little to arrest the decline in knowledge of English among school graduates, so that we have a situation in which few among those working in government departments, banks and even universities can be said to understand books and documents written in English adequately and we daily hear of confusion in one area after another arising out of this ignorance. The elimination of English as a mandatory subject from the Bachelor's course in at least one university has added further to this confusion. Large numbers of youths have been led to believe that English, an international language used as a lingua franca all over the world from Europe to Latin America and Asia and Africa, can be dispensed with. Most of them discover at their own cost that it cannot.

The problem, as we have kept emphasising almost month after month, is not whether we should teach English for ten or twelve years but how it should be taught. Standards in the past fifteen years have been so lowered that books once thought too elementary for the lower secondary stage are considered too stiff for the higher secondary level. An average graduate, even among those who study English for the Bachelor's degree, finds an ordinary English newspaper incomprehensible, and as anyone with experience in the matter will confirm, it is practically impossible to get a letter typed correctly without repeated efforts.

It is in the nation's own practical interests that we need to improve the standard of English teaching. And this, we are constrained to say, calls for extra care. We must first of all banish from our minds the baseless idea that English is or could ever be a threat to Bengali, the national language. Each has well-defined functions, a specific place in the fabric of national life. Equally fallacious is the notion that two or three languages at the primary level impose so heavy a burden on the child as to retard his mental growth. Children learn languages far more quickly than adults, provided of course they are introduced to them in the right way.

The right way in this matter means two things, right textbooks and skilled, tightly motivated teachers. The reading material we have been offering to children for years consists of books written badly by incompetent writers, badly printed by publishers whose only aim seems to be profit. The National Text Book Board has proved wholly incapable of having competently written books prescribed in any subject, not to speak of English Text-books. The entire set of existing text-books in English needs to be replaced or thoroughly revised by a competent team which should include at least one member whose mother tongue is English. We intend no aspersion on people with high degrees in English literature, but knowledge of literature does not confer necessarily knowledge of language. Grammar and idiom in a foreign tongue is a tricky thing, and we cannot afford to take risks where the future of so many is involved. The children deserve to be given the best, and the best in language lessons can only come from those born to the language which is sought to be taught. We recall in this

connection our protest a year and a half ago against a text-book for the higher secondary classes published by the National Text-Book Board, which, as we were able to demonstrate, abounded in both grammatical and idiomatic errors. The outcry in the press led to its withdrawal. That mistake must not be repeated.

The general decline in education has also meant the employment in schools and colleges of teachers who, in spite of their degrees, are hopelessly inadequate to their tasks, with solitary exceptions, of course. They would profit from two-yearly in-service refresher courses to be run again by competent language experts. We expect that English-speaking countries will help in the matter.

Let us make no bones about admitting that we are faced with an emergency. Unless tackled immediately imaginatively, its disastrous consequences will soon be manifest on a wider scale.