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SECOND LANGUAGE

The teaching of English as a compulsory subject will begin at the elementary stage and the examinees at higher levels will have the option to use the language in answer scripts. These important decisions were taken at a meeting of the Council of Ministers Monday evening. The gradual deterioration in proficiency in English among the educated class in the country obviously caused concern and the Council presided over by President Hussain Muhammad Ershad decided on measures to arrest the trend. The decision to make English compulsory second language from Class I to Class XII and to allow students at the higher levels the option to appear in examinations in English is intended to promote proficiency in the most important international language and deserves approbation of all quarters.

English is not only the language of international organisations and regional bodies to which we belong but also the most convenient medium for us for higher studies in different branches of knowledge. It is also the most popular language in the world. More people world over speak English today, either as the first or second language, than any other language. And the popularity is on the rise. The Chinese have since virtually conceded the position of second language to English. The Japanese are making serious efforts to make themselves adept in the use of the language.

English used to be taught in the schools of the country as a compulsory subject from Class III. The latest decisions extend it to the first two classes. The preference for this practice is evident in the rush for the costly kindergartens where English is introduced even to those enrolled in the play groups. The children of poor parents and those in the rural areas are thus discriminated. There are other justifications too for introduction of the second language at the beginners level. No doubt literacy is most readily acquired in the mother tongue but there is no conclusive evidence that competence in a second language may be more easily acquired by those who acquire literacy in their mother tongue.

The aim of education is to develop abilities of the students so that they can contribute to the well-being of the society. Education has naturally to be relevant to historical, cultural and religious tradition of the nation and must also fulfil the needs of the changing circumstances. Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam emphasised, while talking to a news agency on Tuesday, the need of learning English in view of our expanding international relations.

The problems attending the implementation of the decision should not however be underestimated. The deterioration in the standard of English in the country is not because it was not taught at the beginners level. It is more due to lack of competent teachers. We do not have enough of them even in the higher stage of education. The plight of English teaching in rural schools may be gauged from the percentage of failures in the subject at public examinations. The more urgent need therefore is to improve the efficiency of the teachers of English in the school. That is a big task.

We also need to be pragmatic in our attitude towards language. It should be appreciated whatever the degree of importance that circumstance may dictate us to attach to the second language it does not become equal to the first language. And the Education Minister has aptly stressed that the emphasis on Bangla, the state language, will continue and there would obviously be no relaxation in the efforts to improve and popularise the language.