

The Question Of English

We are glad to hear that the government proposes to take steps at an early date to strengthen the teaching of English in our schools and colleges, and that from the beginning of the next school year instruction in English is to start from class I instead of class III as at present. Clear thinking on this question has hitherto been conspicuous by its absence, and there are regrettably people who show a tendency to treat any reference to the importance of English as an affront to national culture. English has not actually been banished from our national life; all that has happened is that it has been transformed into an academic Cinderella, neglected and degraded, used as a pawn in political debate, and exploited by profiteers for its commercial value. This is attested by the mushroom growth of scores, or rather hundreds, of private tutorial homes, kindergartens and other institutes which aim to supply the widespread demand that exists for English.

These private academies, run on purely commercial lines do not have any minimum standards to meet, but the lure of English attracts to them thousands who are prepared to pay any price for proficiency in English. On the other hand state schools and colleges treat the subject as one to which little attention need to be paid by either students or their teachers. An average school graduate today understands practically no English, a college graduate is unable to read an English language newspaper, but when they discover that a deficiency in English narrows their opportunities of employment, they rush to enroll in a private tutorial home at great expense for short-term or crash courses, many of which are found on enquiry, to be woefully inadequate.

We hear sometimes of the use of audio-video aids for language teaching but the quality of English learnt by our boys and girls has continued to deteriorate almost in direct ratio to the emphasis occasionally laid by educationists on the employment of new technology in pedagogy. Uncertainty about the official attitude to English leads to much waste of both money and energy.

From a position where every school graduate, at the end of the secondary stage, could both read and write English we have in the course of about three decades dipped to a level where nine or ten years of indifferent teaching leaves students utterly helpless as far as English is concerned. The effect on the quality of university education, where students have to depend on books in English, has been disastrous. Countries like China on the other hand have progressed to where we used to be. English is said to be the overwhelming preference of China's 100 million high school students.

A foreign language like English can never be, and has actually never been, a rival or threat to the mother tongue, but it has to be recognised unambiguously that it has a definite place in the educational scheme for which there is no substitute. The overriding claims of modern science and technology — which can be properly and adequately studied only in an advanced language like English — must not be overlooked; to do so is to put our future at risk.

Language learning has three aspects to it, ability to read and comprehend written texts; ability to understand spoken language; and finally, ability to use the language we have learnt in speech and writing. Different grades of students have to have different goals to reach, and it is certainly unrealistic to expect that an average school graduate should display all three levels of proficiency to the same extent. The bell boy in a hotel who has to learn to speak to and understand a foreign tourist couldn't certainly be required to master the plays of William Shakespear.