

## **From Academic Literacy to Critical Literacy: Re-imagining English**

### **Language Pedagogy in Indian Higher Education**

**Sayan Chaudhuri**

In 2007, a committee headed by Sukhadeo Thorat was set up by the central government to enquire into the “allegation of differential treatment of SC/ST students in AIIMS”, following widespread allegation of discrimination and harassment of socially disadvantaged students, particularly students belonging to SC and ST communities, in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (Thorat et al. 1). Between 2007 and 2020, many more incidents of harassment were reported and a few were visible in mainstream media representations, usually in the wake of suicides of marginal caste students across various higher educational institutes in the country. During my PhD fieldwork, as I talked to various faculty members and students across a few metropolitan central universities in the country to enquire into teaching-learning experiences within English departments, I heard numerous accounts of discrimination, harassment, and exclusion—students being verbally humiliated for their “poor” English, feeling that the grading system was unfairly stacked against them if they did not possess the requisite linguistic skills, and suffering from invisibility and social isolation in the classroom and on campus.<sup>1</sup> These accounts were not merely recounted by Dalit and Adivasi students, but occasionally by dominant caste students from non-metropolitan, rural backgrounds. A few faculty members would also tell me, sometimes brazenly or in hushed tones, about how a few of their colleagues steadfastly held onto elite, meritocratic assumptions, refusing to engage with the social hierarchies marking their classrooms. None of this is new, and there is an ever-growing database of literature documenting how higher educational spaces in the country have been and continue to be shaped by the logic of caste, class, gender, region, and language hegemonies.

In response to these incidents, I witnessed primarily two types of attitudes: one is to treat them as isolated, exceptional, and rooted in subjective causes which need to be enquired into and institutionally addressed/reformed; and the other is to locate the problems in the ideological principles and social practices shaping the university and seek/demand radical shifts in institutional policy and culture. The first type of response is typically defensive administrator-speak, presupposing the goodness and efficacy of existing institutional norms, which can perpetually undergo a logic of reform and weed out the aberrant elements as and when politically expedient. The second type of response, frequently expressed from the vantage-point of students and faculty-members agitating against the oppressive grain of institutional logic, diagnoses the problems as rooted in the normative construction and practice of the university—any attempt at a solution, then, must remove, substitute, or transform the normative causes. However, the latter is frequently marked by a gap between moral desire and conceptual imagination, and thus, might not significantly distinguish itself from the former approach. While there is a rising clamour to combat exclusionary practices in universities, the imagination of what kinds of alternative practices are to be developed seems to be a more nebulous conversation, particularly at the level of policy enactment and pedagogic practice.

The Thorat Committee Report was both a diagnostic exercise and an attempt at envisioning a set of practical interventions. In its diagnosis, both pedagogic and socio-cultural bases of discrimination were identified. The pedagogic causes included negligent or hostile attention from teachers, perceptions of inequality in assessment, and the lack of foundational English courses to help students become proficient in the lingua franca of prescribed textbooks and classroom lectures. The socio-cultural causes included the prevalence of social slurs, social isolation within classrooms, lack of participation within cultural and sports forums, among

others. The recommendations provided included introducing “remedial” English classes, setting up an Equal Opportunity Cell to look into student grievances, and improving participation of students in social and cultural forums (Thorat et al. 74-75). While it is clear that any serious attempt at addressing the experience of discrimination has to be an intersectional approach, juxtaposing pedagogy with social sensitisation, the critical question I want to pose here is: do the recommendations encourage a concrete imagination of how that can possibly happen?

In the aftermath of Rohith Vemula’s suicide in 2016, there was a renewed demand for the implementation of the Thorat Committee Report. Vemula was a Dalit student and activist at the University of Hyderabad, who committed suicide on 17 January 2016. He was consistently targeted by the university authorities for raising issues on campus as an activist working with the Ambedkar Students Association, a student group on campus. His suicide sparked protests across India, highlighting institutional discrimination against Dalit communities in higher education. I visited University of Hyderabad in 2017, and through conversations with a few students, I repeatedly heard the refrain: yes, the movement strongly brought to attention the experience of discrimination in the classroom, but there was negligible evidence of administrators and faculty members actually responding to the charge. A prominent student-activist on campus showed me how a survey had been carried out to confirm the experience of discrimination within classrooms/departments, but she felt while some faculty members might have become more conscious or wary, there was inadequate conversation on what could be concretely changed in teaching-learning processes and institutional practices within the campus (Jaya).

In 2017, the suicide of a Dalit student, Muthukrishnan, in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi (henceforth JNU) catalysed similar conversations within the JNU campus for days on end: how many students do not experience the participatory agency required to be recognised or

visible in class? How many faculty-members, including well-intentioned “progressive” ones, would teach to the “elite” in class, use “exclusionary” registers of English, not teach content speaking to diverse experiences, and not deign to engage with and support students who felt socially excluded? Again, institutional responses to these issues were scarce. The teachers’ association convened a meeting to discuss how support systems could be better developed, but there was no visible follow-up.<sup>2</sup> The Centre for Historical Studies, where Muthukrishnan studied, did set up an academic literacy course for students struggling to initiate themselves into academic discourses, following recommendations by students; however, this ran for a semester and was not renewed henceforth.

The examples can go on—there are too many stories of institutional neglect and failure. There are two issues that I wish to draw out here and two propositions that I wish to offer, with regard to the construction of language pedagogy interventions and the institutional formalisation of such interventions respectively. First, with every visible and recognised instance of institutional discrimination of socially disadvantaged students, there is a renewed call for building linguistic, socio-cultural, and psychological interventions. Programs to develop proficiency in the English language are usually considered a necessary part of these interventions, particularly with regard to questions of pedagogic empowerment and access to social and professional opportunities. But if one is to ask the question of how programs aiming to develop academic literacy socially help students, and politically empower them, we, unfortunately, do not have straightforward answers.

The anti-caste movement has had a complex engagement with the role of English in social empowerment. As Babu argues, English occupies an inevitably paradoxical role for marginal communities since it is simultaneously the language of the elite but also facilitates

public mobility (Babu 116-17). While it is right to say that the hegemony of English must be problematised and challenged, and that a multilingual orientation must be encouraged given the linguistic complexity of India, it cannot come at the cost of denying the opportunity to learn English. Given the primacy of English in educational discourse today owing to its increasingly established links to social and professional mobility (Azam, Chin, and Prakash 336), higher educational institutes cannot neglect the development of programs catering to the need and demand for English, and, in the context of disciplinary training, English for academic purposes.

The anti-caste movement, however, has constantly demonstrated how language learning has to be necessarily allied to a cultural politics, which recognises and affirms the identity of the marginal student, and seeks a systemic overhaul of the exclusionary design of higher educational institutes. In other words, the project of language pedagogy cannot be separated from a political project of social and cultural transformation (Kumar). In the light of this insight, I want to put forth an axiomatic proposition: that in order to seriously address the political demand for the inclusion, mobility, and empowerment of disadvantaged communities, language pedagogy in higher education, ranging from academic literacy programs to discipline-specific uses of English, has to be necessarily allied to a project of social and economic justice. Such an argument has its historical precedents in the interconnected traditions of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, both of which contextualise learning, including language learning, within the social conditions of learning and orient it towards the development of critical consciousness through which learners can both examine and transform the society they live within.

The framework of academic literacy as both a hermeneutic and a disposition may be inadequate in serving such a political function. Academic literacy programs in India primarily seek to train students towards normative linguistic competence, not necessarily encourage a

critical self-examination and metacognition of the codes and conditions through which they learn. To prioritise the latter, a more suitable category for imagining and organising language pedagogy might be critical literacy. Critical literacy is typically contrasted with functional literacy: if functional literacy is the acquisition of linguistic competence to perform conventional social functions, critical literacy entails “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson and Irvine 82). It should be noted that critical literacy does not eschew the need for developing normative competence. Rather, it emphasises that normative competence devoid of a critical consciousness might ultimately reinforce the interests of dominant sections of society. Disadvantaged students have to play an endless catch-up game where the norms and standards of ‘competence’ are determined by a meritocratic elite. When Kumar argues that the problem is with the “design” of how educational systems assess and sanction particular uses of English to deliberately exclude and subordinate Dalit and Adivasi students, he is suggesting that these norms must be questioned, they must be changed (Kumar). Language pedagogy has to seriously take up this task then—to not uncritically impart the codes of normative linguistic competence, but to create the conditions for the dismantling of their hegemonic and exclusionary forms.

This brings me to the second issue: can existing institutional forms achieve such a goal? The Thorat Committee Report, like many other reports, is informed by a political morality foregrounding the experiences of the marginalised and seeking structural interventions for their empowerment. However, it does not necessarily offer a concrete roadmap for how such interventions may be successfully implemented. And even if such documents delve into greater detail regarding what could be concretely done, it is not necessary that they will be followed

through in the absence of strong accountability mechanisms. Part of the problem is that these recommendations or suggestions, while premised on a critique of institutional norms, paradoxically have to be presented as tenable to normative institutional logic. There are *appeals* made to stakeholders to incorporate changes in the existing work structure; it is encouraged that representative *committees* are set up to investigate the problems further. Depending on the nature of power relations shaping university decision-making—not all universities have robust student, teacher, and worker unions holding administrations accountable and not all administrations are open to dialogue—the outcomes of addressing these recommendations may be widely different. Here, I want to offer a second proposition: that in order to facilitate a more efficacious movement towards the goals of critical literacy and social justice in higher education, language pedagogy has to *institutionally* undertake a multi-pronged enquiry into the conditions of teaching, learning, and working in higher education. Questions of literacy and language learning are inevitably tied with concerns of evaluation, curriculum, teaching methods, social relations between students, cultural backgrounds of teachers and students, and so on. The scholarship on literacy has foregrounded this orientation quite centrally: that literacy is socially mediated, practised, and performed (Street 58-60).

This orientation has also been extended to the study of “academic literacies” too, where the acquisition and negotiation of linguistic discourse is seen to mediate with contexts of individual and social identity, institutional practices, interpersonal relations, and power (Jones, Street, and Turner xvi). However, what I am proposing is not merely an intersectional approach to studying literacy in higher education contexts, but an institutional imperative: programs and centres offering English-language academic literacy training or support must centrally take up the task of carrying out enquiries into the social, cultural and cognitive mediations of literacy.

Such enquiries can serve three primary functions: as a mode of facilitating self-reflection among students, teachers, and even administrators; as a mechanism to describe and analyse the relations of language learning with multiple other processes shaping educational experience; and as a database of experiences, which can serve to inform and support the development of policy interventions more concretely.

Existing programs—whether they be academic writing workshops in public universities or writing centres in private universities—might inevitably end up doing a kind of supplementary work, conditioning students into codes of academic *conduct* pre-determined and pre-legitimised by authoritative gatekeepers of various disciplines. The processes of legitimation are, however, both slightly arbitrary and correlated to the status of the person performing the academic work. As Lakoff evocatively demonstrates through her critique of how linguistic codes in academic departments are shaped by one's place in the power hierarchy, the senior tenured academic gets away with maverick, unconventional writing while the undergraduate student is surveilled under a regime of citational and argumentative propriety (Lakoff 155-157). The processes of legitimation might also frequently disguise aesthetic tropes as intellectual capacities, as Baudelot's work demonstrates through a discourse analysis of sociology assignments of undergraduate students to expose how academic performance relies on an approximate imitation of professorial speech, where the display of certain linguistic-grammatical techniques is assumed to be the marker of success (Baudelot 83-85). Literacy programs, instead, could well do to begin from a place of doubt, and, as the critical literacy approach would recommend, examine the power relations and socio-historical forces constituting the normative dimensions of what gets sanctioned as desirable academic writing. This is not merely to problematise the sanctity of official academic registers and expose the vested interests of dominant communities in upholding

certain constructions of academic literacy; but to also self-critically work towards producing critical justifications for alternative norms and practices in keeping with the moral and political imperative of producing more egalitarian arrangements.

However, there is one more concern to work through; a concern that is frequently a blind spot in similar discussions. One of the central insights of the anti-caste movement has been to problematise the politics of representation within institutional decision-making structures—and to argue that in a scenario where dominant caste/community interests are disproportionately represented within positions of power, it is unlikely that any change towards tilting the balance of power is seriously possible. As a dominant caste, upper middle class, urban cis-man, who has found it structurally easier to be socially mobile and conversationally fluent within academic spaces, such an insight demands that I examine my own positionality: what are my interests and agendas in advocating for a critical literacy approach?

Teaching a course on critical literacy in an elite private university, I have found that the elite student is all too happy to *master* and *perform* a critical vocabulary without tangibly changing their life-choices, dispositions, and social relationships—a concern which is vividly brought out in Handler and Stoner’s ethnographic work on the disjunct between the performance and the practice of critical thinking (Handler and Stoner).<sup>3</sup> As Fulkerson also shows, in his typology of writing pedagogy dispositions in US writing programs, those teaching through a critical pedagogy approach can be evasive about critically examining their pedagogic choices, assume a morally self-righteous position regarding the “right” knowledge to be imparted in the classroom and refuse to engage with oppositional voices (Fulkerson 662-65). Such a hectoring approach is antithetical to the critical literacy value system which is premised on a constant rigorous self-examination of its own politics and modalities. However, this contradiction or

hypocrisy has been one of the most abiding critiques of the critical pedagogy and critical literacy traditions overall. The problem is partially located in the people facilitating these classrooms or pedagogic initiatives— typically men from dominant communities— and partially in the benevolent, self-righteous, or patronising approaches assumed by these initiatives. This can also lead to a perception of failure among both teachers and students— the teacher may find it bewildering that students are not interested to learn about conditions of power, oppression, and justice; and students may find it frustrating that the teacher does not speak to their particular lived experiences or practical interests.

It becomes important, then, to seek out and open oneself up to critique by those who I, despite my best intentions, may continue to structurally oppress and subordinate; and to recognise that my understanding of both disadvantage and empowerment is partial, and thus, listen with humility and endlessly learn from those who speak through experiences of oppression. However, the critique of one's dominant vantage-point and practice is not to render one paralysed, unable to re-orient one's sense of agency in the larger struggle towards the redistribution of power and resources. Here, I am distinguishing my position from three other positions: the paralysis of action induced by acute liberal guilt where one cannot consider oneself as anything else but a passive bystander to political action; self-congratulatory benevolence without examining one's complicity with oppressive structures; and extractive research-work done on vulnerable communities to further one's career agendas ("Accomplices Not Allies" 4-5). Instead, the critical recognition of one's privilege can serve a dual purpose: to open oneself up for a rigorous (and inevitably painful) self-critique and ethical reorientation of self; but also learn to reorient one's agency to further the emancipatory agendas of oppressed communities.

There is a popular maxim in good intentioned liberal pedagogy: that students carry *funds of knowledge* which must be recognised and validated in the place of learning. This is encouraged as a tactic to include the student within the classroom, to engage with the knowledge that they possess by virtue of their subjective experiences, and to particularly recognise the minority and non-dominant perspectives certain students embody. Such an insight follows from the critique of *banking pedagogy* in both the critical pedagogy and critical literacy tradition: that students are not empty vessels where knowledge is to be deposited (and also selectively withheld to maintain relations of hierarchy between student and student, student and teacher), but are active co-creators of knowledge themselves.

This position is further developed within literacy scholarship to offer a critique of the normative basis of the English as Second Language (ESL) framework—to argue that ESL discourse classifies the linguistic proficiency of students vis-à-vis the notion of linguistic, and by extension, knowledge deficits which will need to be filled by the language teacher (Canagarajah 11-13). In contrast, the desired pedagogic orientation is to consider cultural and linguistic difference as a conduit to building diverse, democratic educational spaces—to engage with difference is to recognise both the (minority) identity of the student as well as diversify the epistemological basis of classroom knowledge. However, such an orientation can very well devolve into a liberal politics of accommodation, where the recognition of difference and diversity does not necessarily displace the interest of dominant groups and does not complicate the authority of the teacher-facilitator who conveniently moderates the conversation from above. I am proposing a critical literacy approach which problematises the modes of knowledge production as well as the role of the teacher-facilitator—just as the normative construction of academic literacy is constituted through power relations, the normative embodiment of teaching

or imparting literacy is also constituted through power relations. To examine one is to unravel the other. The reader may ask at this point, how will all of this be achieved? Towards the end of the paper, I will suggest a few starting points for how institutions, particularly literacy programs, can embark on the path of change. But before I can do that, an important conceptual clearance is in order.

### **Are Academic Literacy Programmes All That Bad?**

In a survey of the trajectory of scholarship within the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) discourse, Swales observes a rather troubling phenomenon. While the English language has continued to entrench its hegemony across institutional contexts, the notion that English constitutes a form of linguistic imperialism and must be necessarily challenged and localised has not sufficiently halted the triumphalism of English. As English assumes the form of “a powerful carnivore gobbling up the other denizens of the academic linguistic grazing grounds”, he notes that the EAP movement must be seriously concerned and attempt to combat this phenomenon (Swales 374). He argues that perhaps it would be useful to evaluate the socio-linguistic construction of academic English itself: to make explicit how each of its constituents, whether they be citational practices or sub-genres of writing, have emerged through different rhetorical and discursive traditions; and critically compare it with academic registers in other languages (Swales 379-81).

This might facilitate a more robust internal critique of academic English—it historicises and contextualises each of its constituents, examines their functions, and develops more explicit critiques of both the possibilities and limitations of registers of English. Swales’ insight also reminds me of a certain irony I experienced as an English student in both the University of Delhi and JNU. While ideological critiques of the sanctified colonial construct of English would shape

the politics of the curriculum, it would not translate to a rigorous examination of the immediate means of knowledge production, the language in which students would write and the faculty would speak: English. Let alone an explicit evaluation of what such an English (or such Englishes) would consist of, there was little conversation on evaluation to begin with.

In my interviews with various faculty members, I would pose the question of how they evaluated the desirability of standards that the curriculum would uphold—I would find conflicted responses, where certain faculty members would emphasise the need for critical, rigorous thinking as a necessary function of academic engagement, but also concede that pedagogic and evaluation systems lacked institutional deliberation, and lament how students were not adequately achieving academic literacy. Other faculty members would more bluntly call out the nexus of curricular, pedagogic and evaluation systems in perpetuating inequalities of access and outcome. In conversations with students, I would find a similar tension: again, many would value their exposure to critical thought, but falter when it came to recognising what constituted desirable writing and argumentation and fail to identify what exactly they were evaluated for. A few students would express a tangible sense of betrayal and abandonment—they neither understood what the educational system was aiming to do nor did they feel that it was benefiting them at all. Now it is easy to lay the primary blame on the glaring lack of feedback systems and a rigorous and socially just evaluation culture. It is no doubt a big part of the problem: the criteria for evaluation is not made transparent or explicit; there is a lack of social accountability mechanisms and infrastructure to ensure students receive constant feedback on their writing; and there is a lack of institutional deliberation on the relationships between evaluation, teaching, and learning. However, even if there is greater emphasis on feedback, would it necessarily clarify the basis of these standards? And would it be able to re-orient the value-systems faculty and students

have in mind when they think about evaluative standards? The answer is inevitably different based on the vantage-points, experiences, and identities of the person concerned. But the variations and conflicts in response are not necessarily put into productive conversation—they are subjective responses to the experience of a fundamentally opaque system. The variations are more an indication of the inequality of the system—some benefit, some scrape through, and others fail based on the degree of social and cultural capital they already possess.

Academic literacy programs, in some sense, attempt to address the gap between the normative requirements of learning and the ‘deficits’ of learners by teaching the codes and formats of academic reading and writing and also offering feedback to students—in public universities, primarily as remedial courses, bridge programs, mentorship programs, ELT courses, and academic writing workshops, and in a few private universities, through writing centres. Except for a few instances, particularly in courses that teach the history and philosophy of English language pedagogy, it is unlikely that these programs delve into the enquiry of what constitutes and validates academic writing. There is an institutional presumption that everyone knows what they are talking about—when students are told to write assignments, it is assumed that they will eventually figure it out. It is likely that almost everyone would have a vague inkling of how academic language is distinct from non-academic language: Academic language is more syntactically complex, uses specialised vocabulary and jargon, typically contains multi-clause sentences, combines multiple sub-genres to produce a complex piece of work. However, if one is asked to ground one’s understanding of the different elements with regard to social, historical, or even institutional contexts, it is unlikely that many would be able to. Academic language becomes an ahistorical and decontextualised necessity—it must be learned without an understanding of why it exists, what it does, and how it has come to assume the forms

it has. In the absence of a critical, socially and historically contextualised understanding, it is likely that the construction of academic language will emphasise the mechanical and the prescriptive over the social and ideological. If it is unclear how academic language is constituted, it is also unclear how it is to be validated and evaluated as legitimate, true, desirable, and necessary.

There is a validation of the primacy of academic language by virtue of its institutional existence and reification, established through a social, historical and discursive process not necessarily visible to the student; there is also a validation of the language by virtue of the authority of the teacher, who deploys professorial speech and assessment to sanction the language. Both, I have implied previously, have severe cracks in their construction and require rigorous scrutiny. The third mode of validation is rhetorical, where the repeated use of linguistic tropes comes to play established cognitive and social functions. As the work of Felski demonstrates, the “performance” of criticality in humanities discourse entails the use of certain reified rhetorical and narrative tropes (5-8). To validate particular performances or constructions of criticality as institutionally desirable is more a function of power than a function of critical evaluation. This insight complicates the supplementary function of literacy programs in both public and private university settings. Academic literacy cannot be taught as a separate skill to be mechanically mastered since it is intertwined with the production of disciplinary knowledge, particularly in the humanities and social studies, and as many have demonstrated, even in the sciences.

Considering the challenges in the existing modes of validation, it becomes untenable to maintain certain institutional attitudes towards academic literacy. I will list a couple here. In public university settings, apart from the pathologising and patronising semantics of *remedy* and

*bridge* inherent in academic literacy programs, there is also a strong hierarchy maintained between subject knowledge and academic literacy (analogous to the hierarchy between *hard* knowledge and *soft* skills)—senior faculty teaching the hard subjects hardly deign to stoop low to learn from those teaching writing workshops. Such a hierarchy does not merely foreclose ethical accountability but is also epistemologically untenable given how disciplinary knowledge is mediated by linguistic construction. Second, in private university settings, where writing centres and programs are being set up adapting from the field of writing pedagogy in Anglo-American contexts, the institutional emphasis is on achieving *critical thinking* skills as a by-product of the rhetorical initiation into academic literacy. Critical thinking as a cognitive function cannot be determinately separated from its rhetorical construction or reification—hence, as Felski would argue, there are many more ways to be critical than what academic literacy programs would sanction. Both these attitudes support the gatekeeping of knowledge within dominant communities, by maintaining an artificial barrier between sanctioned knowledge and un-sanctioned language, and thus call for a dismantling of the edifice of academic literacy as we normatively know it.

### **Imagining Alternatives**

In the final section of this essay, I wish to provide a set of pointers on how a shift in orientation towards critical literacy can be enacted. This section is speculative in nature. It suggests that there may be scepticism regarding whether any of the following sounds feasible, but to attune the imagination to a restrictive notion of practicality will only get us so far. However, demanding the impossible might also run up against institutional barriers—there needs to be both conceptual and practical referents to aid the imagination of change. Thomas Docherty, in his elaborate advocacy for the idea of the university, offers a set of ““first principles” through which an

expansive university can be normatively justified in a scenario where policymakers are all too ready to cut funding and look at universities as merely instrumental to the economy (16-17). My attempt follows from a similar impulse: to provide a set of principles through which the institutional practice of “critical literacy” within higher education settings can be developed. Moreover, such an institutional practice needs to be located in an institutional form. The current imagination of such forms, as I mentioned previously, frequently prioritise the work of supplementation of pre-determined disciplinary norms rather than the enquiry-based production of alternate norms and practices to aid the movement towards the goals of social justice. An instructive contrasting example in this regard is the Language Development Centre (LDC) established in the University of Cape Town, which has been shaped by a political consciousness cognisant of the needs of redistributing power in post-apartheid South Africa (Thesen and Pletzen 10). The centre has conducted a series of ethnographic studies to map how students construct their understanding of classroom lectures, assignments, assessments, and so on—the studies are inevitably allied to the re-construction of educational practices in the university. While the lingua franca is officially English, students are negotiating with the language through their subjective socio-linguistic vantage-points.

The studies evocatively demonstrate how students are re-orienting and problematising official registers of English in the process, all of which have a necessary bearing on both the aesthetic and epistemological uses of the language. Further, the use of “development” in the title is rather striking, and, in my opinion, a welcome contrast to the semantic imaginaries of literacy programs in Indian universities. Development anticipates a dynamic orientation to language in higher education: language is not a fixed monolith to be emulated and re-produced, but consciously and critically developed. Development also anticipates the notion of an educational

teleology as it will need to be asked: what is one developing language towards? Here, teleology could extend to three elements in the developmental process: the development of the internal aspects of language, that is, the development of vocabulary, rhetorical awareness, context-based usage; the development of consciousness towards critical orientations of society and the ethical desire for achieving redistribution of social power and resources; and finally, the development of educational structures towards arrangements of social justice. The work of the LDC re-orientes language pedagogy in relation to the various facets of the educational process—whether it is curriculum, assessment, or teaching—and offers a database of experiences which can inform further interventions. Taking my cue from the work of the LDC, I wish to offer three starting points for how existing academic literacy programs can be re-oriented. These are discussed in the next three paragraphs.

First, the use of ethnographic enquiry: many of the insights in sociolinguistics and literacy studies which have de-mystified autonomous constructions or universalistic presumptions of language and language learning have emerged from ethnographic enquiry and community engagement. The question of how power relations and social practices constitute one's relationship with literacy can be studied through a combination of observations, interviews, and a close reading of various literacy practices. Doing ethnography, however, is not a value-neutral act and entails the exercise of self-reflexivity to recognise the limitations of the ethnographers' vantage-point at any given point. There are primarily three ways in which ethnographic enquiry can be used by language development programs to work towards a critical literacy orientation. First, the kind of ethnographic enquiry I am referring to does not entail individual acts of research but are socially collaborative practices of enquiry facilitated through conversations between researchers, practitioners, and the subjects of study. A striking model of such an

experiment can be seen in the project documented in “Exploring the Everyday,” published by Nirantar, a feminist organisation: the project was a collaboration between adult literacy practitioners/organisations working across India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, to initiate, collaboratively reflect on, and develop ethnographic projects to aid curricular development in the social and educational contexts the organisations already worked within (“Exploring the Everyday” 4-5). Similarly, language programs can initiate projects in collaboration with specific departments, faculty members, administrators, and students—such projects can also serve to open up critical conversations between various participants of the university community who might otherwise remain restricted in their isolated silos. These projects can only be initiated through a process of dialogue and developed through a process of reflection—this will entail both a social process (involving workshops, interactions) and a methodological process (re-working assumptions and questions). Second, the ethnographic approach also provides a path to re-orienting the vantage point of both the researcher and the researched. For example, in Stanberg and Lee’s work on reading the pedagogy of English as a critical text, one of the central insights is that the relationship between the ethnographer and the teacher is a dynamic one: that they share notes with each other, disagree with each other, and identify limits and possibilities in each other’s work (Stanberg and Lee 332-336). Such enquiries do not merely need to be formalised as research studies; they can also be developed as methods through which the teaching-learning process, administrative process, and even student cultural processes can be constantly examined. For example, in the teaching-learning dynamic, both the teacher and student can learn to pose questions through which they can enquire into the conditions of each other’s work as well as examine their own assumptions and interests. The work of language centres can be to facilitate the development of such enquiries—language centres will be at a

particular advantage to do so since these enquiries fundamentally require the development and analysis of linguistic thought in relation to questions of ethical disposition and agency, embodiment, emotion, and social practice. Third, ethnographic enquiry will necessarily produce tonnes of thick description and analysis. The documentation of the various processes producing the university can lend themselves to more concrete policy interventions.

The second suggestion is to see literacy as the production and re-invention of knowledge: Writing programs and interventions are institutionally mis-characterised as providing remedial, supplementary, or supportive work. This is premised on the mischaracterisation of literacy as a mere skill, which needs to be a prerequisite to facilitate competent engagement with disciplinary knowledge—as I mentioned earlier, literacy mediates with subject knowledge. This implies that the act of reading and writing is not subordinate to the production of knowledge, but simultaneously an act of re-constructing or inventing knowledge. Bartholomae takes the metaphor of invention further to consider how the act of writing within the university is a way of inventing the university—to write in a specialised register, to try out the “peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating...arguing”, is to partake in a discursive task shared by a community (Bartholomae 4). In other words, the imaginary of the university community is constituted through the initiation into particular acts of writing.

However, such a metaphor has to conceptually extend itself to the question of power: certain knowledge systems belonging to dominant communities come to be valued over others, which will provoke necessary contestation and the re-invention of knowledge. There are two ways in which language centres can facilitate the production of non-dominant knowledges: first, through ethnographic studies of what is being produced through assignments, and written and oral accounts of discipline-specific knowledge in the university, and describing the

meaning-making practices of students in conversation with them; and second, by organising workshops and discussions with faculty, subject experts, and students to discuss how the insights produced by students can be incorporated into curriculum which can, in turn, re-orient pedagogical forms. Such an exercise is to move beyond the token validation of student difference in the classroom—a position I have already critiqued—to deliberate instead on the implications of the difference. Knowledge is re-constructed by the student, brought forth into the university community, thus inevitably re-inventing the terms on which the university community is established.

The third and final suggestion is problematising and re-orienting English. The use of the English language is unavoidable in the present juncture, especially for disadvantaged communities, to facilitate both access to knowledge and social mobility. However, language centres can play an active role in displacing the *triumphalism* of English—the use of English does not need to weaken the use of other languages—and encouraging a critical examination of the role English plays in our social and political lives. Further, language centres can focus primarily on helping to mould the curricular and pedagogic uses of English, which continue to isolate and exclude disadvantaged students. There are at least two approaches which could be followed. First, disciplinary and communicative registers of English must be clearly explained and justified, to be able to encourage contextualised awareness of why certain linguistic tropes need to be used. As Swales recommends, the description of these registers must be grounded in socially and historically contextualised terms. Second, the uses of English within higher education spaces can be extensively mapped, in terms of reading, speaking, and writing practices, to understand the ways in which different members of the university community negotiate with English—this, in turn, can actively aid curricular and pedagogical orientations.

These are only a few starting points; the reader is encouraged to imagine more. It is also possible that the reader will be skeptical of such an imagination (there are too many institutional obstacles one may run up against) and instead continue to find possibilities in the existing system. However, the ugly truth is that the existing system is doing very little to empower disadvantaged students socially and politically. Meanwhile, elite faculty members and students continue to validate and mobilise themselves in their own elite networks, basking in social and cultural capital, stretching their academic limbs from the local to the global. The need for change is urgent.

### **Postscript**

I want to draw attention to a few limitations in my argument, which could not be adequately explored.<sup>4</sup> First, while I have presented a schematic conceptual justification for why the critical literacy orientation is important across different university settings, it also needs to be fleshed out how such a project can be practically staged within particular institutional specificities. My own engagement has been primarily with more elite metropolitan universities, which limits my understanding of how such a project can be mapped across state university settings. For example, to translate or adapt such a project within state-aided public higher education would require a rigorous contention with existing bureaucratic and governance structures. It might be important to imagine how interventions could be staged within existing disciplinary modalities—for example, the domain of English literary studies. Second, I have generalised some of my claims through a smattering of anecdotal experience but have not sufficiently provided cross-institutional data to bolster my claims. While I imply that documentation will be a necessary part of the ethnographic orientation in critical literacy practice, it might not be enough to build a strong case for institutional change without more specific accounting of existing

institutional modalities and experiences. This points towards a much larger problem in the kinds of higher education data that are available: while there is increasing data on educational inputs, there is a severe neglect in the accounting of institutional practices and experiences. This is an avenue that requires collective attention and work. Finally, while I have suggested that the critical literacy orientation can facilitate a dismantling of the elite, dominant interests underpinning language learning and pedagogic processes, the question of who will actually lead and participate in such a project agentially remains a critical question. I see an inherent limitation in critically minded elites being dominantly at the helm of such a project. In a context where the composition of teachers, students, and administrators are largely from dominant communities, a necessary structural prerequisite of effecting socially transformative change is also affirmative action and diversifying the university community. Further, the systematic neglect and de-funding of public universities accompanied by increasing normalisation of private higher education, will only bolster disparities in access, let alone participation. In other words, substantive change is not going to be possible without rigorous contestation at the level of higher education policy, governance, accountability structures, and funding.

### **Notes**

1. These conversations, primarily transpiring between 2016 to 2018, happened in universities such as JNU, University of Delhi, University of Hyderabad, English and Foreign Languages University (Hyderabad), Jadavpur University, and IIT Bombay. Apart from fieldwork conversations, many informal conversations happened across spaces of student protest (particularly Occupy UGC in 2016, which brought together students across central and state universities to Delhi).

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2. The Jawaharlal Nehru University Teacher's Association (JNUTA) brought out a report which can be accessed here:  
<https://jnuta.wordpress.com/2017/03/14/jnuta-condolence-meeting-and-open-house-at-4-00-pm-at-sss-i-committee-room-today-14-march/>.
3. I teach a course titled "Education, Literacy, Justice" at the Young India Fellowship based out of Ashoka University, introducing students to critical debates on literacy and education.
4. I was alerted to some of these limitations by the reviewer's comments.

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Sayan Chaudhuri

PhD Scholar, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture

Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

[sayan1@gmail.com](mailto:sayan1@gmail.com)

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