

The Need for English Not Over

ENGLISH has been with us for the last two hundred years. In 1830's it replaced Persian as the language of the Court. Coming in the wake of English conquest of the subcontinent, English has spread its tentacles far and wide over the life and thought of the people, made itself a strong tool in the hands of the ruling authority, served as the lingua franca amongst the different peoples of the land and acted as the medium of instruction in the government offices, law courts, in the secondary and higher educational institutions for a pretty long time.

Whether we like it or not, it has become a part of our consciousness or unconsciously through the forces of circumstances, history and the passage of time. Some one has jokingly said that like a thing in adverse possession, English has, by right of our long possession, become ours.

From time to time, there has been fierce nationalist aspirations in the country against the omnipotence of English in our society. English did not originate in our soil; it is not the mother-tongue of the people; its nuances do not reflect the mores of our society. Although it has enriched itself from our culture and geography, its grammar and usage vastly differ from ours.

To many, English came here as the language of the rulers that usurped the political power and imposed itself on the defeated people who had to swallow it. Even in the hey days of the British rule, hardly one per cent of the people spoke or understood it properly despite full official patronage and support behind it.

English was the language of the elite and the upper crust, the well-to-do, the bureaucrats and the establishment, the language of authority. It had immense value as a passport to office, status and position. It had snob appeal and was regarded as a window to the world. With so many favourable forces behind it, English seems to have struck its root deep here and has belied the hopes of many that with the departure of the Raj, English would lose its place here and recede in the background to make room for the vernacular languages.

After 1947, the influence of English has been getting weaker in Bangladesh. Schools once called English High Schools are just called High Schools — the word English has been dropped quietly. After the emergence of Bangladesh, Bengali has, over the years, replaced English as

the state language and English is no longer used in government offices except in the higher courts of law and with optional facilities, in the universities.

There were times when many people pulled down signboards in English from shop-fronts, tore down the names and number plates from cars, offices and houses and made bon-fires of them in public. Agitation for 'Ingrezi hatao' (Remove English) continued from time to time depending on the intensity of the moments. Now that English has made place for Bengali as the medium of instructions in all stages of learning and been dislodged from the official position, the furor seemed to have calmed down.

English is no longer a compulsory subject in the degree course. Step by step, it has lost its dominant position from every walk of our national life. Apparently, English is now in retreat in Bangladesh. Is it all to our good?

Any discussion on the position of English in Bangladesh is bound to generate heat and passion and is likely to provoke emotive sentiments both from its votaries as well as those who think that its undue privilege should end. There are some middle-of-the-roaders who want a compromise to have English as a Second Language and insist on functional English. There are cross-currents of pull and push over English like a see-saw game.

Voices against English wax eloquent at certain times of the year when everybody becomes all on a sudden conscious of duty and responsibility to develop the mother tongue. The zeal then gradually subsides and slumbers till the next year. This process seems to continue.

Many of us conveniently forget that love for the mother tongue is not the denigration of English. We can both develop our vernacular and at the same time retain our love for and use of English. Both these can complement and supplement each other to mutual advantage. We have to enrich and cultivate Bengali to enhance its status and position as a living and forceful language and there can be no two opinions on this.

But why the outcry against English to pull it out further? One does not enrich a language at the cost of the other. The peaceful coexistence of the two does no harm to any one. On the other hand, their complementary and supplementary role help each other mutually. The sooner we learn this truth and accept English with grace and tolerance, the better.

Although English is supposed to be taught in the Primary Schools, this remains largely in fiction. The Primary Teachers Training Institutes are not equipped enough to teach English to the trainee-teachers. In the Secondary Schools, English teachers are not only few in number but quality-wise, they fall below expectation.

For a variety of reasons, English teaching in Teachers' Training Colleges is, at best,

mostly, abroad. They have immense snob appeal and are regarded as a road to status and position.

Why is it that our leaders who in public life wax eloquent against infiltration of our culture by foreign language and influence send their wards to the Kindergarten Schools at a huge cost?

Why spoken English courses are mushrooming up here and there not only in the metropolis but also the other cities of Bangladesh? Who patronise them and for what objective? Evidently, our attitude to English is ambivalent and is likely to remain so for some years to come.

The strength of a language lies in the attitude of the people towards its growth and development. Our attitude to English has been indifferent. Despite all talks of modernisation, the text books still go in English in Bangladesh? There is certainly a bright future for it if we care to make use of it to enrich our material and cultural future. We need it for our technology, for research, for acquiring knowledge from abroad to be synthesised with our own to develop the country.

We need English as much as others, say for instance, the Japanese do. They need it for their drive to internalisation.

In Japan there is a heavy demand for English so much so that there is hardly any place where you do not find a teacher of English. Because of shortage of teachers, native speakers from English speaking countries can expect to get jobs as English teachers in Japan, even though some may not have specialised as teachers of English to foreigners.

In view of the gradual slide in the standard of English and lack of good institutions with qualified teachers in English, many of our brilliant students, who had their schooling in the vernacular but did not take up English, find themselves at a tremendous disadvantage to enroll themselves in foreign universities.

To make up the shortfall, hundreds of special coaching centres have shot up here and there offering tuition in English courses to prepare students for different courses of studies abroad. There has not been any survey and evaluation of these institutions.

Despite high fees, there is no shortage of clientele there and these institutions have been thriving.

After all has been said and done, what should we do now? Admittedly, we must put our very best in the development of the mother-tongue and our tribute to it must not remain confined to lip service alone.

We want English to be taught at our schools and universities to supplement our knowledge in those technical matters that can not at the present time, be done in the vernacular.

Our need for English should not blind us of our prime duty to Bengali but at the same time, we must not harbour any resentment against English as being an alien language.

It is our link with the rest of the world to share the wealth of knowledge that it had acquired over the centuries. Let us forge this link with the best of our ability and use its services as a helping friend.

What is the future of

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indifferent. Pronunciation of English is a free-for-all and largely depends on the origins of the teacher. "Particular" is sometimes taught to be pronounced as "Harticular", peculiar as "hecular", Pathetic as "Hathetic". In some places, particular becomes "Farticular", "person" becomes "ferson", "foem" becomes "foem" in north eastern Bangladesh, "Came" becomes "Kham", "come" becomes "Kham", "Speaker" is called "Speekhar". Regional variations of accent and pronunciation are perhaps inevitable and can not altogether be eliminated but in the absence of a standard pronunciation, it is here a free game for all.

Why is it that under the existing situation in our country it is difficult to find a person who can write on his own at least ten sentences in English correctly? What is wrong with our teaching and learning of English at home and the educational institutions? It is not enough just to lament over the loss of standard of English.

Many think twice before opening up their mind on English, lest it provokes a sleeping volcano. Why do we feel shy to bring it out in the open?

There is a popular belief that the Kindergarten Schools, most of which teach in the English medium, offer quality education. These institutions are supposed to give a good grounding in English and prepare the students for a successful career at home and,

for Victorian English. In the village schools, "Babu English" still survives with pompous and long-winded sentences and constructions, archaic words and hackneyed phrases. In place of shopping, we go for 'marketing' which means an entirely different thing now-a-days. It still rains "cats and dogs" in Bangladesh although it no longer does so in modern usage. We are still in the back-wood of English that has left long ago.

Professor J S Turner, our teacher in the university in the mid-fifties, used to exhort us to use verbs as much as possible in English. He wanted our words to work — not just to spin and beat about the bush.

He advised us to be economical in the use of adjectives and expected us to write concise, crisp and lucid sentences.

However, we had our own ideas of impressing people with long, laborious and complex sentences and heavy expressions and a strong desire to show off with unfamiliar and bombastic words. Little did we think at that time that it is the simple, plain and direct English that is most difficult to write.

The language of the Bible is possibly the best example of what is simple, exact and graceful English that has ever been written and is yet to be equalled.

What is the future of

own education programme. Although no in-depth study has yet been carried out as to the success of these efforts, off-hand observations have shown that none of these NGOs have been able to run the schools over a full time period successfully as per NFPE standards.

This has not only involved a waste of funds for the organisations concerned but has meant a waste of time for BRAC who has invested much training and professional time into these ventures.

Recognising the potential and commitment of some NGOs and prompted by the failure of others in implementing the BRAC non-formal primary education model, BRAC

has decided to design and Education Support Programme (ESP), yet another branch of its rapidly expanding non-formal primary education programme.

ESP's prime goal is to complement government's primary education drive by assisting and facilitating NGOs committed to education of children.

Technical and financial support will be provided to some of these organisations so that the BRAC school model may be replicated successfully at a macro level, covering a larger number of unschooled children throughout

BRAC's experience over the past years has shown that the problems of non-enrollment and severe dropout in Bangladesh can be over come and that reaching education to every child in the country is not an impossible task.

From only 22 schools in 1985, BRAC's Non-formal Primary Education Programme (NFPE) has now expanded to over 6000 centres, retaining leftout and dropout children between ages 8-10 and 11-16 in school for three years and two years respectively.

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will identify and select potential NGOs working in rural areas and lend them its technical and material knowhow with strict followup to ensure that their schools are meeting BRAC standards.

One Manager and three assistants make up the ESP cell. NGO selection is already under way. By end of 1991 ESP hopes to involve atleast twenty NGOs starting each with five NFPE schools for the 8-10 year age group.

In addition to training and curricula support, some organisations may also receive financial support in which case salaries for teachers may be provided by BRAC. — Access

Forming Partnership for Literacy

NEARLY half of Bangladesh's population is below 16 years of age. Basic education in Bangladesh is not available to all school age children. Although an estimated 77% children initially enroll in primary school, 65% dropout before their fifth grade (mostly girls). Illiteracy among younger children is growing in tandem with illiteracy among adults.

Most of the non-enrolled and dropout children are girls and boys from the poorest section of the society barred from education due to poverty and gender.

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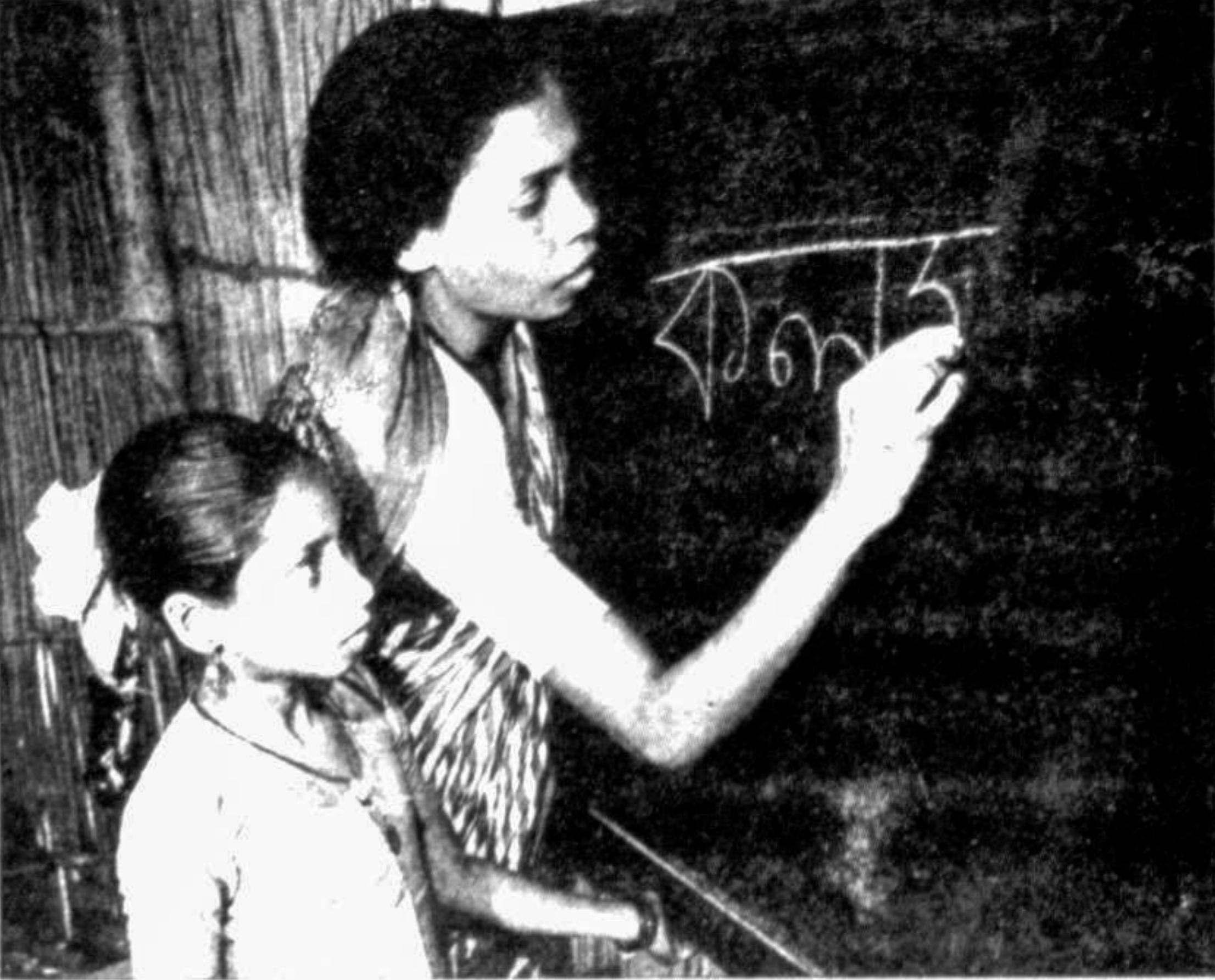
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Primary School Survival Rates Increase

THE number of primary school pupils reaching the fourth grade slightly increased during the 1980s worldwide but survival to the final grade is still low in many developing countries.

According to a paper just released by UNESCO's Section of Statistics on Education, the lowest rates of retention among the developing regions were recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean while Arab States have the highest.

Prepared by Suren Gajraj and Francoise Tandart and entitled "Primary Education: Survival," the paper discusses the incidence of survival in some 100 countries and focuses on the retention rates to the second, fourth and terminal grades of primary education.

Since it is generally accepted that a person should reach grade four in order to acquire and retain literacy skills, the paper raises questions as to whether primary school systems are meeting this objective.

Although the situation varies in individual countries, the number of pupils reaching fourth grade in 1988 was 60 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 62 per cent in

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Southern Asia, 75 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 86 per cent in Eastern Asia and 92 per cent in the Arab States. An average of 96 per cent of enrolled children reach grad four in the developed countries.

Retention rates to the final grade of primary education decreased in the majority of countries of sub-Saharan Africa and remains low in many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and in the majority of countries in southern Asia.

In sub-Saharan Africa, survival to the final grade varies from eight per cent in Guinea Bissau to 98 per cent in Mauritius and the Seychelles. In only nine countries of the region was the survival to final grade over 80 per cent and it was between 60 and 79 per cent in 14 others.

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per cent of pupils attain the final grade in all other developed countries.

The paper makes special mention of low survival rates to the second in some demographically important countries like Ethiopia (65 per cent in 1980), Brazil (59 per cent), Bangladesh (48 per cent) and Pakistan (65 per cent).

In Latin America and the Caribbean the duration of primary education varies from five to nine years and the survival rates for the terminal grade between 1980 and 1988 increased by between 19 and 22 per cent in 14 countries and declined in eight others, with Surinam showing the largest drop of 23 per cent.

Eastern Asian countries like Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Republic of Korea have survival rates of about 100 per cent for all grades. In southern Asia, enrolled pupils reaching the terminal grade range from about 25 per cent in Bhutan, around 50 per cent in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, and between 91 and 94 per cent in Iran and Sri Lanka.

In developed countries, the number of pupils reaching grade four is below 90 per cent in Bulgaria, Belgium and Israel, and below 80 per cent for the terminal grade in the three countries. More than 90

The relatively low incidence of survival in many developing countries evokes the question, however, of whether the minimum objective of the primary school system, the acquisition of literacy skills among the school-age population is being achieved," say the paper. — UNESCO



But how many of the primary schools have the look of this one?

Retarded Children Discover Literacy

GU Peng was good at nothing, except making troubles. With a permanent smile on his face, he spilled on his mother's books and even spat on her. At the age of 10, he did not know which shoe to put on which foot.

He had been rejected by several ordinary primary schools before his mother sent him to a special school for the retarded in Beijing 10 years ago.

Qing Yan, the mother, did not expect that the special education for the retarded had enabled his son, who suffered brain damage during an acute epileptic seizure at age 6, to make a living by sewing when he graduated last year.

"I used to take the special school as a baby-sitter," she said. The Xicheng Special School for the Retarded in Beijing is one of the country's 158 special schools and 200 special classes attached to ordinary schools that allow retarded children to learn at their own rate instead of facing the pressure and humiliation of trying to keep up with normal children.

The school, which is academically equivalent to junior vocational schools, only admits those aged between seven and 11 with IQ (Intelligence Quotient) between 75 and 50, according to Zhang Tianlun, the principal.

Medical experts say in China those whose IQ ranged from 75 downward are considered retarded. (The average IQ is about 100). Those at the low end of the scale cannot take care of themselves and need special care. But the others can be educated to some extent, with care and patience.

Before admission, the retarded children are interviewed by teachers to see if they can speak properly, count figures or identify colours. The children also take an IQ test.

"Special education" in China aims at making the retarded self-sufficient and able to hold jobs within their capacity. Thus, most special schools of

seven and 15.

Those who are kept out of school are much of a burden to their families. For example, Qin Yan, Gu Peng's mother, used to lock her son up at home because there was nobody to look after him.

This, she said, only made his condition worse. Otherwise, she took him to work, which did not solve the problem, because he was in the way.

Many parents of mentally retarded children feel guilty because their "somehow" caused their children to be abnormal.

A recent survey in southwest China's Sichuan province of 336,000 mentally retarded children, found that 16 per thousand cases are due to congenital malformation, 34 per thousand are a result of high fever convulsions and three per thousand are victims of epilepsy psychosis.

The State Education Commission has stepped up efforts to educate retarded children. Then plan is to have qualified retarded children aged between seven and 15 (3.2 million, or 80 per cent of the total) reach literacy level by year 2000. To meet that level in China, one must learn at least 1,500 characters and can do some simple arithmetic.

The special education for the retarded is part of the country's ongoing literacy campaign, which aims at reducing illiteracy by four million people every year. The aim is for the illiterates among the 15-40 ages group to reach literacy standard by year 2000.

To bring the 3.2 million qualified retarded children to literacy level, the State Education Commission and China Welfare Fund for the Handicapped jointly invest 23 million yuan (about US\$6 million) every year since 1988 to build more facilities. They have set up some special classes in Beijing and Shanghai to train teachers for special education.

— Depthnews Asia

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In China, teachers help stu-

dent with difficulties in speech by teaching them to recite tongue twisters and doggerel, said Cai Wen, the teaching director.

Though years of special education have taught the students some basic skills such as sewing and embroidery, factories are reluctant to employ them. This is because, some factory directors say, they may cause outweigh the contribution they make to the factories.

It was with some prodding from the Beijing Municipality Government that some garment factories handed out job offers last year for the Xicheng school's first batch of graduates, according to Principal Zhang.

Gu Peng and his classmates should consider themselves lucky, as they are the few who have an opportunity to receive special education.

According to Wang Zhu, an official with the Special Education Department of the State Education Commission, China has 10.17 million mentally retarded people, four million of them between the ages

Here, too, one of the initial problems is language. The IB runs language courses of several months' duration, including writing groups aimed at stabilizing the new arrivals' residual German.

Back in 1989, the IB launched a pilot project to help refugees from Afghanistan. After several months of German language tuition, participants in the project received technical training in woodworking, metalwork and electrical engineering. The practical result was a solar plant for generating electricity. The participants could later serve as development workers to help rebuild Afghanistan.

At the same time, Afghani women acquired useful office and administrative qualifications. Afghans were also among the trainers engaged for the courses.

There are currently around five million foreigners living in Germany. In 1991, in an operation financed by the Federal Labour Minister, the IB conducted some thousand German courses attended by well over ten thousand people.

Young foreigners hampered by language problems throughout basic schooling can thus obtain the qualifications needed for vocational training.

IN Press