

Language, Multilingualism and Education: The Interplay

Abstract

This Paper titled 'Languages, Multilingualism and Education: explores the role of language in teaching learning situation. She has highlighted the fact that language learning should be embedded in the socio-cultural environment of the child and multilingualism should be used as a resource to bridge the gap between home language and the school language. She has also highlighted the fact that literacy originates from the oral language of the child and in the absence of the child's voice it is not possible.

I often ask my learners to reflect on 'What is Language', by asking them to try translating this sentence in to English- ***"Yeh Paani Jhoota hai"*** and almost never, they are able to provide the correct expression in English reflecting the rich cultural connotation this sentence has. It is an example through which we are able to grasp an understanding of the uniqueness of each language with its structural, social, cultural and political embeddedness.

Language is one of the most intriguing aspect of human behavior. It not only functions as the medium of communication for us, but also with the help of language, the reality of the social world gets constructed. Language is a highly organized, systematic means of representing experience, and as such, it assists us to organize all other ways of representing (Britton, 1970).

Children come to school with a rich repertoire of their home language, unique with personalized expressions, cultural markers and contextualized understanding of words. At home, they can maneuver their tone and sentences to meet their various demands as per

situations. The very nature of language as an arbitrary symbolic system of representation presents to the teacher the possibility of using it for non-conventional, reflective practices in the class. A language text by way of a strong narrative, can become a potential site for transformation and analytical stance. However, the multilingual character of India lends certain complexity to the educational context here. A country where language changes after every ten miles, where there are almost 165 mother tongues, sadly uses only 33 languages as the medium of instruction to impart education to its primary kids.

In this article, I would attempt to highlight the 'role' of language in the formative years of a child, how it is 'constitutive' of a child's socio-cultural reality, and yet, in a country which abounds in languages, how the language of teaching acts to 'dissociate' rather than connect the knowledge of the outside world from the local milieu of the child. I would examine the role of the language of instruction in primary classes in the development of early literacy skills among learners and, finally, would suggest what teachers

can do to explore the vast resource that the multilingual character of India presents. The article draws mainly from my experiences of observing teaching learning in elementary classrooms in MCD and NDMC schools in Delhi.

Child's Language

When a child starts going to school, he/she already has a rich repertoire of his/her home language. Not only is he/she able to communicate with ease in that language, it helps in forming his/her 'perception' about the world. It is with the help of his/her home language, that a child 'comes to know' his/her surroundings, is able to 'direct' his/her own understanding and shape his/her attitudes and values. The home language of a child shapes the child's personality, because, the child lives and grows up in the environment that language creates. It fulfills the child's emotional and intellectual needs. By the time children enter school, most of them have already acquired remarkable mastery over the basic structures of their mother tongue. They not only know how to use language for a large number of transactions, but also know the importance of adjusting one's language to different contexts and audiences i.e., they acquire the capacity of keeping their linguistic systems separate and, of course, mix them in legitimate ways when they wish to. Social-constructivist theorists Piaget and Vygotsky have underlined the importance of language in the cognitive development of the children (Kumar, 2004).

India is a land of many languages; there are about 1652 mother tongues as per 1961 census and 22 languages scheduled in the VIII list of the constitution. People in India display 'translanguaging' with ease, i.e. people have the ability to negotiate multiple interaction events in multiple languages. However, the multilingual

character of India lends a certain complexity to the educational context here. There exists a hierarchy among languages in a layered manner. From the point of view of the science of language, there is no difference between what is variously called standard language, pure language, dialect, variety, etc. In spite of the fact that all languages as abstract systems or subsystems are equal, the complex ways in which history, economics, sociology, and politics interact with language, some languages become more prestigious than others and become more associated with socio-political power. It is generally the language of the elite that acquires power in society and becomes the standard language.

In principle, it is absolutely possible to do anything in any language, including advanced research in the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences. It is also important to remember that standard is not a fixed constant. Within the domains of power, it keeps changing its locus: Braj, Bhojpuri, Maithili are not now considered dialects of Hindi.

Language Teaching Scenario

At school, a child is confronted with an alien atmosphere. He encounters a school language which is very different from his own home language. Gradually, it starts settling in the mind of the child that his own home language is not sophisticated and efficient enough to carry out different functions at school. There are direct and indirect indicators from the teachers and from the general linguistic environment of the school that the home language of the child is linguistically challenged to deal with the knowledge disseminated in the school. It is an underdeveloped language, and not the 'standard language' of the text books.

The fact that children are taught all the school subjects in a standard language places a substantial constraint on their ability to relate school knowledge with everyday experiences. The out of school world in which they spend the greater part of their day is constructed by a language quite different from the one in which their conceptual repertoire of school knowledge has been developed. A wide gap develops between the language used in the wider social milieu and the language in which they receive the formal knowledge of school subject.

This problem of rift between the home language and the school language is deepened when the 'other' language that a learner has to make his own happens to be English. It is unfortunate to observe that the control and grasp that a person has over spoken English is now seen as the marker of one's intellect. English is also the language of tertiary education system in India, and is linked to economic and social prosperity. Every year, we observe a growing demand for English medium schools owing to its importance in securing jobs later on. As a result, we see a very wide spectrum of English Language Teaching scenario in India. In the ethos of private English medium schools, any tendency that some children might show for using their mother tongue is expressly curbed, often by means of punishment. The limited exposure they get to their mother tongue is in that one period allocated to teach the language as a school subject.

On the other hand, are the state run government schools which offer English only as a subject while maintaining regional language as the medium of instruction. Seemingly, these schools maintain a multilingual environment in the spirit of Three Language Formula (proposed by Kothari Commission in

1964-66, reiterated by National Policy on Education 1968 & 1986), but, the multilingual capacity of the students are hardly developed or utilized here. Various factors contribute to this- Teachers own perspective, motivation and competence in using multiple languages, specially English, shortage of requisite exposure to reading materials in multiple languages for students, lack of innovative pedagogy to introduce and make necessary arrangements for acquisition of languages other than the regional or mother tongue and so on. Teaching of English also happens in a technical fashion, without addressing the aesthetic sensibility that literature can develop. Many a times, even the functional competence to 'use' English for real authentic purposes is not developed in students. Continuously, these school students find themselves at a loss while competing with their English medium pass out counterparts because of the common perception that they may not have the requisite skills, knowledge and smartness that English would have lend them. In a study conducted at IIT Patna, it was found that there are about 20 languages spoken by students across IIT Patna, almost every student at the institute is multilingual, however, the dominance of English as a medium of instruction at IIT Patna results in students dropping out from the course and performing poorly. Students with a rich linguistic heritage are systematically forced to go through a situation that brings down their performance (Kumar & Nilu, 2013).

The case of children speaking minority languages is even more poignant. Right to Education Act (2009) mandates equal access to education to all the children from 6 to 14 years of age. Providing access to school is not enough, access to knowledge becomes possible only when

education is provided in the language which is understood emotionally and intellectually by the child. Article 350A of the Constitution mandates that “it shall be the endeavor of every state and every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups” (Vanishree, 2011). Many minority or tribal languages do not have a written script, that is why, many diverse ethnic languages spoken by tribal groups are often clubbed under one major regional language of the state. For example, in the case of Hindi, about 20 languages, which have been grouped under Hindi, had more than one million speakers each in 1991. Within the classroom, this translates into the reality of several children with “Hindi” as their mother tongue, in fact not being able to understand the “Hindi” of the curricular transaction (Jhingran, 2005). This implies that many children enter school with a language and dialect different from that of the school.

Language and Literacy

Literacy is the ability to read and write with comprehension. In the words of Paulo Freire “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Freire establishes a dialogic relationship between words and World. Literacy is not mere decoding, it is getting to know the import of written word by making it alive through the lived experience of the children by connecting it with the language of their dreams, their play and their fears. Their oral expressions should become the building block of literacy. Quite clearly, literacy development takes place from oral language development to written forms of expressions. However, “the

rigid curriculum, the premium placed by the system on standard language, the devaluation of the child’s home language, the tendency to treat the child as ‘*tabula rasa*’ discounting the rich understanding of oral language and other competencies the child brings to the classroom, the perception of multilinguality in the classroom as an obstacle to the teaching of language and literacy rather than as a resource, the primacy of the textbook over the child’s lived experience and the absence of the child’s voice in the classroom—all serve to alienate the child from the process of engaging with literacy as a meaningful process” (CARE India, 2016). In the absence of their own language being used for communication, learners fail to make the sense of the curricular material. Learners suffer emotional and cognitive dissociation from the classroom interaction and are neither able to participate fully nor are able to make any sense of curricular material. The burden of incomprehension is the reason for a large number of students making an exit from school prematurely. The findings of ASER suggest that 54% of the students surveyed are unable to decode a second-grade text in fifth-grade. Although the report focuses on rural areas, according to ASER (2013), the trends apply to the urban areas as well (ASER 2013).

Making a Case for Multilingual Pedagogy

When in our country the objectives of language teaching are defined as sustaining and enhancing the degree of bilingualism and multilingual awareness that children have, schools consciously facilitate home language displacement, when their first task should be to relate the home language to the school language. Some studies (Sehgal, 1983) have shown that children who study through the mother tongue

medium do not suffer any disadvantage, linguistic or scholastic, when they compete with their English medium counterparts. Based on the empirical study of 78 children in the 15-17 year age groups, Gupta (1995) argued that 'two years of mother tongue medium in the initial stages immensely aids the child's acquiring better linguistic proficiency both in the mother tongue and the second language. A smooth transition from the home language to the school language in terms of discourse can be ensured if the mother tongue is the medium of instruction. "Several recent studies have also shown that there is a highly positive correlation between bilingualism, cognitive flexibility, and scholastic achievement. Bilingual children not only have control over several languages, but they are also academically more creative and socially more tolerant. The wide range of linguistic repertoire that they control equips them to negotiate different social situations more efficiently (NCERT 2005). Noam Chomsky's proposition of Universal Grammar also supports the idea that a child can learn as many languages with ease as he is exposed to in his social-cultural environment (Chomsky, 1986). A groundbreaking study from Ethiopia, where the language policy ensured multilingual education with eight years of compulsory mother tongue education in the primary classes, the study of Amharic as the national second language and English as a foreign language, has important implications for Multilingual countries like India. The study consolidates the theory that the students who with longer mother tongue instruction followed by a transition to English have higher achievement levels particularly in Mathematics and Science and students who learn three languages have higher level of academic achievement than those who learn two

languages, particularly in Mathematics and Science (Heugh, 2013).

Recent research in this area have established how this multilinguality can be used as a resource, a teaching strategy and a goal. Researchers like Agnihotri argue for a pedagogy rooted in multilinguality even for teaching of English "that would ensure the emergence of a society that is marked not only for its happiness and peace, but also for its justice, equality, liberty and care for others. It should also be a society that encourages rationality and respect for diversity (Agnihotri, 2010).

As we can see from the above discussion, that the mother tongue of the child is the most important resource that can be used to initiate the process of formal learning in schools. Imagine the vast resource that goes wasted collectively in a class in the form of different experiences recorded in diverse languages that the learners speak. In a country, where multilingualism is a norm, rather than an exception, it is time to exploit the potential of Multilingualism as a resource. We would now briefly see '**What Teachers can do**' in real classroom scenarios to cater to facilitate learning in a linguistically heterogeneous class:

Know your learners: Many a times, we don't realize the diversity that is present in our class and limit our teaching to the interest of a few students. It would be worthwhile to conduct a linguistic survey of your class right at the beginning to make your classes culturally and linguistically relevant. The survey would enable you to become more sensitive to the needs of the students who may not even want to acknowledge their language due to negative stereotype attached to it. Involving the students in the survey would also make them sensitive to differences in accents and styles of speaking that some of their classmates

may exhibit due to different linguistic backgrounds.

Listen to them: Languages are learnt best when learners feel emotionally at ease in the class. Krashen argues for keeping a check on emotional state of the children or keeping the affective filter low in the class for maximum language learning to occur (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Allowing learners to speak freely and spontaneously in their own language has its own benefits. Many teachers across nations have reported how they observed the free flow of ideas out of class by reticent students happening not in the standard language of the class, but in the home language of the child. Allow these communication to occur in your own class too. It can very well become the starting point for teaching them to communicate in 'target' language.

Build on what they know: While total 'immersion' in the target language is considered to be a necessary condition for language learning by a number of researchers, the initial few classes can be organized in such a way that learners can co-relate the target language with their own language. Krashen points out that while concurrent translation is not effective, the use of two languages in the classes can be done in such a way as to provide comprehensible input in the target language, using the first language to provide background information (Krashen, 1985).

Follow Multilingual Practices in your own Class: Exhibiting multilingual competence in class is a good idea to create an ethos of respect for all languages. Along with 'translanguaging', creating a multilingual print environment in class would give the necessary concrete exposure to learners. Creating a bilingual word wall, labeling common objects in the classroom in multiple languages would help in building the verbal repertoire of the learners. Asking learners to collect and bring reading materials in their home languages and making them a part of reading corner, from where, 'a pair and share' reading activity can be conducted, would result in collaborative learning. Once motivated, learners can do a compare and contrast task between the features of written expressions of various languages, thus, arriving at the meta-linguistic awareness of languages.

As teachers it is utmost important to understand the nexus between language, multilingualism and education. A classroom where learners voices are heard and respected, where practices rooted in the multilingualism are incorporated, where culturally relevant teaching materials are used, is bound to create citizens who would be able to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner in a democratic country like India.

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