

Interview

Face to Face with Navnit Kumar

Vijay Kumar

Mr. Navnit Kumar is a language teacher (PGT Hindi) in a Delhi government school. He has done his teacher training from the Department of Education (CIE), Delhi University.

Vijay Kumar (VK): Most people have a perception that teaching is a very relaxed part-time job. Do you agree?

Navnit Kumar (NK): No, not at all. If taken seriously, it is one of the most tiring, challenging but also satisfying professions. That is why I chose this profession. In fact, my whole family is in the teaching profession. I was also interested in teaching. Therefore, I chose to be a teacher, and at present I'm teaching in a government school.

VK: Can you tell me something about your schooling? How was it different from the present day scenario in terms of the teaching-learning process, the curriculum, the textbooks, etc.?

NK: I did my entire schooling in a government school in Bihar. During our days, teaching was textbook-centric. Generally, students would read the text and teachers would explain it. However, when stories or anecdotes were used, students could understand the concepts more easily and the class became more interesting. In our times, there were fewer public schools; consequently there was a good mix of students from different socio-economic backgrounds—a sort of common schooling. It was very different from what we see these days in the government schools in Delhi, where most of the students are from poor or extremely poor families.

VK: What was the linguistic background of the students in a class? What was the medium of instruction and how effective was it?

NK: At school level, the medium of teaching was Hindi. In my class, most of the students used to speak Hindi (standardized *Khari Boli*) at home, but some spoke *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, *Bangla* or *Magahi* (a variety of Hindi) at home. The vocabulary of these languages is similar to that of Hindi with minor variations. In fact, Hindi has more than eighteen related varieties. So, Hindi was the medium of instruction, but at times one could see the influence of native languages on the Hindi used in class. For example, Hindi verb forms vary with gender, but in *Magahi*, the verb forms are gender neutral.

VK: What did the language classes of that time look like? What was the pedagogical process/strategy adopted in language teaching? To what extent was it successful in the teaching of the second language?

NK: We used to enjoy our language classes, especially the prose (stories, novels etc.) part. The poetry part used to be comparatively less interesting. The reason for this was that most of the Hindi poetry, from *Aadi Kal* to *Riti Kal* has been written in *Braj Bhasa*, *Awadhi* or *Maithili*. Understanding standardized Hindi is not a problem for a child even if his mother tongue is a variety of Hindi, because he knows it through textbooks, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, films, etc., but understanding a completely different variety is more difficult. Also, traditionally, while teaching poetry there is an emphasis on the *chhand* (meter), *alankar* (figure of speech), etc., which is generally dry

and uninteresting for a child. I wish these technical aspects of poetry could be taught in a more interesting way.

VK: Moving on to your teaching experience, can you tell us something about the socio-economic and linguistic background of your students?

NK: My students are generally first generation learners. Their parents are mostly daily wage earners, labourers, helpers, etc. In fact, most of them are first generation learners from the rural villages of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana. Most of the children either speak Hindi, or a variety of Hindi at home.

VK: Having children belonging to such diverse linguistic backgrounds, how do you manage your classes? Do you face any problems?

NK: Most of my students use different dialects of Hindi in class, which has an impact on both their spoken and written Hindi. Sometimes, they make mistakes because of the variation in their mother tongues from standardized Hindi. I explain to them that some of their mistakes are common and are simply a reflection of the influence of their mother tongues. Then I demonstrate to them that there is a certain pattern in their mistakes. The idea is to make them proud of their mother tongues, while at the same time making them aware of its variation from the standardized language, so that they can pronounce and write correctly.

VK: What do you think about the effect of the mother tongue on the acquisition of other languages? Is it negative or positive?

NK: I feel that the mother tongue helps in the acquisition of a second language. Through the mother tongue, a child is already acquainted with a language system. Therefore, a word of a second language can be learnt as a synonym of

the corresponding word in his mother tongue. Similarly, grammatical constructions can be learnt as a model, with certain variations as compared to the mother tongue. But, as I have already said, sometimes the influence of the mother tongue on the second language cannot be ruled out. For example, a child tends to make mistakes in the pronunciation and grammatical constructions of Hindi as a result of the influence of the mother tongue: a child whose mother tongue is Haryanvi may pronounce 'bulb' as 'balab', or a child whose mother tongue is *Magahi* may make mistakes related to verb forms because her/his mother tongue is gender neutral.

VK: What pedagogical process/strategy do you adopt while teaching Hindi in school? In what way is it different from the way teaching was done in your school days?

NK: In our school days, the emphasis was on textbooks. There was also a lot of stress on the technical aspects of literature. I feel that though these technical aspects of language teaching are important, the manner in which these were taught was not very appropriate. I try to teach these topics through discussions, examples, anecdotes, debates, etc. I suggest to my students to read newspapers, magazines, novels, stories, etc., because one can't master a language by focusing on the textbook only. I also tell them to read about the topics that are referred to in the chapter. Interdisciplinary approach, according to me, is always better.

VK: I had a chance to attend a presentation made by you at Ambedkar University, Delhi. You explained how a difficult chapter 'Kootaj' (name of a plant), written by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, could be made interesting for children. Could you tell me a little more about this method?

NK: Unfortunately, when I was in school, this chapter had been taught in a linear, one-dimensional and uninteresting manner. I found that ‘*Kootaj*’ encompasses or touches on diverse areas such as Geography, History, Mythology, practical wisdom, zest for life, satire on corruption, etc. Therefore, while doing this chapter with the children, I touched upon all these topics. Similarly, if there is a reference in the chapter to plate tectonic theory, I encourage the students to refer to this topic in their geography books. If there is a reference to Indo-European languages, I encourage them to independently find similarities between various languages. In the same way, if there is a reference to Rahim, a child can better understand the point if he is aware of the story of Rahim, his achievements as a poet, etc. If the author has written a satire on corrupt practices, the teacher should initiate a discussion on it. The students can be asked if they have encountered any corrupt practices, and what changes have been made to curb these practices. Thus, I work on the premise that inter-disciplinary approach in teaching is one of the prerequisites of language classes.

VK: What is your opinion regarding language curriculum at various levels of schooling. Is it relevant and interesting?

NK: As far as Hindi is concerned, certain changes have been made. For example, at the higher secondary level, some relevant topics related to creative writing and journalism have been introduced. However, in the junior classes, instead of including poetry or prose chapters written in archaic, older or different forms of the language, chapters written in the contemporary form of the language should be included. Unnecessary emphasis on *alankars* and *chhands* in Hindi poetry at the junior level of schooling should be avoided.

VK: Children fear grammar. In fact, I too dread grammar. Do you think grammar should be taught in the manner it is taught?

NK: During my school days, I used to consider Sanskrit as the most difficult subject. It has so many *dhatu-roops*, *sabda-roops*, rules, etc., and one has to memorize all of them. In Hindi, the grammar portion, particularly the technical parts certainly creates disinterest among students. However, this does not mean that grammar should be totally neglected; in fact, the word-building aspects of grammar such as *upsarg* (prefix), *pratyay* (suffix), etc., should be taught in an interesting way. Topics should be chosen in a manner that grammar teaching does not become a tedious and boring exercise.

VK: What modifications would you suggest in the course content of Hindi textbooks to make it compatible with the recommendations made in NCF 2005?

NK: The recommendations of NCF 2005 are good, but its problem areas are implementation and training. As I have already told you, emphasis should not be only on the technical aspect of a language. The language curriculum should be such that it should directly or indirectly touch on different disciplines and subject areas such as Sociology, Political Science, Philosophy, History, Natural Science, Mathematics, etc.

VK: Thank you for sharing all this.

NK: Thank you for such a nice discussion.

Vijay Kumar, M.A. (Linguistics) and M.Phil (Library and Information Science) from the University of Delhi, is a language and library science researcher and activist.

vkbooks@gmail.com