

In a Multilingual Class

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I was assigned the task of teaching grade three children in a government school. Most of the children were from lower middle class background, and were first generation learners. While the mother tongue of these children was Chhattisgarhi, some of them could speak and understand Hindi (a few common words and sentences in *kamchalau* Hindi, not textbook Hindi). I did not know a single word of Chhattisgarhi. I present below a brief account of some of my initial interventions in the teaching of Hindi to these children.

One day, I decided to tell the children a story as we were not able to make much headway with reading the textbook. When I asked the children if they would like to hear a story, all of them showed a keen interest and enthusiasm. I prepared a story, and the next day I began narrating it to the children. But within a few minutes (I was not able to finish even one-fourth of the story), I realized that the engagement and interest level in the story had dipped significantly; as many as 80 per cent of the children were not listening and were engaged in some other work (copying something from a book, playing with a bottle or a pen, talking, etc.) I told them to stop whatever they were doing, and then asked them why they were not listening. I did not get any answer. Just to check, I asked a few questions, (*kahani mein kaun kaun hai?*; *ped kahan hai?*). Once again, I did not receive an answer. Some more questions later, I realized that most of the children had not been able to comprehend the story. Their enthusiasm and interest had

vanished as they were not able to understand some of the key words in the story, and were therefore neither able to make sense of the story nor make any connections. It was therefore natural that they had lost interest.

I asked a few of them—who seemed to understand—to translate the story in their own language for the others. They were surprised. They could not believe that a teacher was asking them to translate the story in their language. Some of the children looked at me in confusion, others were feeling shy to come forward, some were smiling at me, and some may even have been thinking what a stupid task I was assigning them.

I then requested a grade five child to translate the story for the class. He asked me if I really wanted him to translate it. He reconfirmed thrice to reassure himself, and then with a shy smile on his face, he started translating.

There was pin-drop silence in the class. Everyone was listening with rapt attention. After the story was over, I asked the children some questions, and they were able to answer them. I was quite satisfied. The class did not end that day, in fact the real classroom transaction started from that day; a lot of children gradually started talking to me in the language(s) they knew.

At times, when I was not able to understand what they were trying to say, they tried to communicate with the help of gestures, or by making pictures, or by asking another child who they felt could help. The reverse was also happening; they unhesitatingly started asking me

to re-explain things if they did not understand what I was trying to say.

They also started sharing their fights, jokes, songs, experiences of home, functions, field, and the work that they did, in the class. The children not only started speaking up, but they also started taking part in the class activities. I also noticed a change in the behaviour of the children who were initially not listening to me; gradually they started helping me. They started participating in group activities and helping other children, and stopped going out from the classroom whenever they wanted to.

The entire interaction became very meaningful for all of us. We were all learning from each other, not just about the words of each other's language and the way the verbs, plurals, etc., worked, but also about how we did different things, how we said things, and how we related to things. In short, we learnt a little bit about each other's culture. The conversations brought out the diversity in how people address each other, how they celebrate festivals, what kind of work their families are involved in, how it is done, what it requires, etc. There were conversations around each of them, and the recognition that each of them was worthwhile and contributed in a meaningful manner. We also talked about different languages, identity issues, dignity of the individual and culture and its relationship to language.

This experience of a multilingual class gave me an insight into a lot of important issues related to language and communication. I could appreciate what it took to break through the boundaries of 'a language'; although language by itself was not the only tool, but it certainly played a crucial role as it was not only connected to aforesaid values, but also with meaning-making, thinking, sharing, and communicating ideas.

The whole experience made me very reflective about what may have happened in the earlier

classes that I had taught. Had the children been engaged at all, and had they comprehended anything? Why had the children been so hesitant to use their mother tongue? It also made me think about the kind of changes I should make in the way I facilitated the classroom, and what I could learn from the children. I also realized that given the opportunity, the children could put in a lot more effort to understand what was going on, and also follow the teacher and the learning route proposed by her/him. More importantly, they could make the teacher understand what they wanted to convey and thus ensure that the classroom transactions become more meaningful.

Finally, I realized what the term 'engagement' implies, and how an unfamiliar language could hamper children's contribution in the class; while the use of their own language could increase their participation. Giving a voice to all the languages of children in the class could be a really challenging task as it involves a lot of effort on the part of the teacher, but the gains are immense and more than worthy of the effort.

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