

Interview

Face to Face with Dr. John Kurrien

Kishore Darak

Dr. John Kurrien is the co-founder and Director Emeritus, Centre for Learning Resources in Pune which has focussed on quality in the development and education of disadvantaged children.

Kishore Darak (KD): Good afternoon John. As we plan to discuss language education in India, let me begin by asking about the genesis of Centre for Learning Resources (CLR).

John Kurrien (JK): My wife Zakiya Kurrien and I started the CLR in 1983, and worked there for almost thirty years as its founding directors. One of our main thrust areas was the teaching and learning of home and regional languages at the pre-primary and primary level, and English in regional medium elementary schools.

We continue to undertake large-scale projects in Maharashtra and various other states across India in collaboration with government agencies and NGOs. The goal of our work is to improve the development and learning of children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

KD: What are some key language issues in primary education?

JK: Our experience, as well as that of others, indicates that major language problems arise when the children's home language, if distinct from the state language, is not addressed in our schools. Unless you begin with some attention to the home language in school, many tribal and migrant children, for example, are going to be struggling to read and write in the school medium of instruction, often the state language.

Moreover, a child's cognitive and personality development, as well as progress in all other school subjects, is strongly related to his/her early acquisition of language skills in the primary years. Limited early language development leads to an inability to cope with other subjects in high school. All of this happens because our regional languages are taught badly right from the primary level onwards.

KD: Can you clarify this?

JK: Yes. First and foremost, most teachers, teacher educators, national test designers and policymakers do not understand that reading is all about comprehension. Many people think that the teaching of reading only involves reading aloud. However, while I may be able to read a text aloud, it does not mean that I understand it.

KD: So you are highlighting the fact that reading Marathi or Hindi aloud because you know the Devanagari script, does not guarantee understanding?

JK: Yes. Confusing 'reading aloud' with 'reading with comprehension' is the most critical problem of our language teaching at all levels. Silent reading (with comprehension) is a more important indicator of actual reading levels.

Also, at our primary levels and beyond, only the most trivial level of comprehension is tested, which involves looking for some 'give-away'

words in the passage provided. The standard practice is to get individual children, or the entire class, to read aloud and answer trivial comprehension questions. But there is far more to teaching reading comprehension, such as asking questions which are inferential, or focusing on the author's intent, etc. Finally, there is a gross neglect of teaching writing skills—an issue which has barely entered into any discussions on language.

KD: I am now coming to an important issue in language education, the question of English.

Many people think that English as a medium of instruction is the way forward, and the exponential expansion of English medium schools reflects this. What are your views?

JK: In my opinion, the role of English in school education is the most critical issue facing the country. First, every school should give every child an opportunity to acquire basic English skills. Schools are crippling children's futures when they leave school without these skills.

Acquiring English is absolutely critical. However, this does not mean that you can only acquire these skills through English medium schools. In fact, with some notable exceptions, I am totally opposed to the current indiscriminate expansion of English medium schools.

KD: But what can you say to poor and middle class parents, who desperately want their children to go to English medium schools?

JK: First let me note that while English skills have always been in great demand in colonial and post-independence India, till recently this did not translate into the current pan-Indian craze for English medium schooling, cutting across all classes. This fundamental change began in the 1990's with the liberalization and

globalization of the Indian economy, and a growing mass awareness, rural and urban, of the importance of English skills.

But our regional medium schools simply did not understand the challenge, and were unable to equip the children with basic English skills. This critical failure is primarily responsible for the extraordinary expansion and popularity of English medium schooling in the last three decades. And given the importance of English for economic and social mobility, English medium schooling is seen as the panacea of all evils.

Parents, especially those who come from non-English speaking backgrounds, equate success with the ability of their children to speak in English and pass exams. But most children from such backgrounds are only able to parrot some formulaic phrases in English, and learn by heart to pass exams. Most parents do not understand that this constitutes neither the foundational language proficiency, nor the cognitive and other skills that are required to prepare children to cope with an unpredictable future beyond school.

But looking at 'successful' students studying in English medium schools, and swayed by their own ambitions, they feel that they have arrived when they admit their children to an English medium school. There is a very important need to educate parents on whether English medium instruction is what will best serve the immediate and long-term interests of their children, and thus enable parents to make informed choices.

KD: What is your response to Dalit activists who see English medium instruction as the path to emancipation and social mobility, and corporates who promote English medium education in the name of equity and economic growth?

JK: Dalit activists and corporate heads have also been disillusioned by the failure of our

regional medium schools to provide English skills. But instead of significantly improving the teaching of English in regional medium schools, English medium schooling has come to be seen as the equitable and empowering educational solution. In my opinion, for the vast majority of poor and lower middle class children in rural and urban India, this is a recipe for disaster.

For children who come from socio-economically disadvantaged and lower middle class backgrounds, all that I have said about the problems with education in the regional/state languages as the medium of instruction applies to the majority of new English medium schools who cater to these groups of children. Children learn by rote, and acquire very limited listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

In fact compared to regional medium schools, the burden of incomprehension is further compounded in these new English medium schools because many of their teachers' own English skills are extremely limited, especially their spoken and writing skills. Moreover, they have no clue as to how to teach English to poor and lower middle class children who come from homes in which English is never spoken, and rarely heard.

The push for English medium education has bizarrely extended to the pre-primary years with many kindergarten(KG) classes opening in slums or rural areas. Nursery rhymes and some stock phrases in English, and learning to read and write the English alphabet is the order of the day, taught by untrained /poorly trained teachers who do not even have a nodding acquaintance with English.

Can you imagine the impact of such an education on a child's personality development—the stunting of her sense of self, confidence, and cognitive development? And what happens to these children as they proceed to study in English medium schools, where the

subjects are taught in a 'foreign' language taught by linguistically challenged teachers.

KD: But how do other countries cope with the growing demand for English skills? Are they also abandoning their languages for English medium schooling?

JK: Almost every country in the world has recognized the importance of English. But no country, with the exception of some ex-colonies, is following the Indian route of rapidly expanding English medium instruction at the expense of schooling in the regional languages. We must learn from China, a country with a similarly large population and even larger ambitions to be a global power. It has made a huge effort to improve standards and move away from rote learning.

Unlike India which was ranked almost at the bottom, China very recently performed excellently in PISA, an international test that assesses critical thinking in reading, science and mathematics of secondary school students from many countries. Like almost every developed and developing country, China has recognized that the most effective school education for rich and poor alike is conducted in the mother tongue. But acknowledging that English skills are also critical, they have put the teaching of English as a second language in schools and post-secondary education on a war footing. This is what we need to do in our regional medium schools.

KD: And what would teaching English on a war footing in our regional medium schools concretely entail?

JK: First and foremost, improving the standards of English teaching and learning should be given the highest priority in our regional medium schools. All skills need to be taught with a focus on the early development of spoken English.

The most significant reform is to ensure that all English teachers in regional medium schools including new recruits and existing teachers are themselves proficient in English. Methods of teaching English need to focus on how to teach children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and for whom English is a foreign language.

Moreover, since all that we teach should be understood by the learner and be meaningful, a multilingual/bilingual approach should be adopted, especially in the early years. A successful example of this is the CLR—a three-year bilingual radio programme in Marathi/English and Hindi/English, which has successfully taught millions of urban and rural children in regional medium government elementary schools basic skills in spoken English.

The next most important reform is in the area of curriculum and evaluation as it directly influences what is taught and learnt. We need to junk most of our textbooks that are used to teach English as a second language, and the sooner we do this, the better. In addition to new textbooks, given its backwash impact on teaching and learning, we need to introduce assessment procedures that record progress in all English language skills.

Every state needs to constitute an expert committee to look at the issue of English in regional medium schools comprehensively—teacher training, curriculum, textbooks and evaluation reform, etc. NCERT and SCERTs have a significant role in catalysing this process.

KD: Your final thoughts on the subject...

JK: Unless our regional medium schools improve their overall standards, especially in English, we can expect that in the next few decades English may well replace Hindi as the largest medium of instruction. Currently, more students are studying in English medium schools

than any other regional medium school, with the exception of Hindi.

In pursuit of the goals of equity and quality, state governments, corporates and some large-scale NGOs have over the last decade promoted the rapid expansion of English medium schooling. This has been primarily justified on the basis that ‘the people’ want it. However, people wanting it, is hardly reason enough for the government and civil society to abandon the effort to improve English standards in regional medium schools.

Both national and international tests indicate that the standards of learning in all our schools, whether government, aided or private is very low. The evidence clearly indicates that this stems from learning by rote, and a lack of teaching of higher-order skills. For reasons stated earlier, English medium schooling for the masses will not improve effective learning, but will in my opinion only make matters worse.

But this view is not based on any systematic empirical research. And therefore, before we continue to expand English medium schools indiscriminately, utmost priority should be given to an impartial and thorough assessment of these new English medium schools, with a focus on how and what children are learning. If the government agencies do not undertake this, it should be taken up by Indian corporations and foundations. Initiating and funding this process would be a significant contribution to India’s educational future.

Kishore Darak is a Pune based teacher, teacher educator and an independent researcher. Textbooks, Curriculum, Politics of Language, etc. are areas of his interest. He writes frequently in Marathi newspapers and magazines on the issues of elementary education.

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