

Multilingualism as a Classroom Resource: Teachers' Experiences

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Introduction

India, like some other countries in the world, is highly multilingual, with a large number of languages belonging to five different language families. The 1961 census (considered to be the most reliable till now) recorded 1652 different languages, of which 87 languages are used in the print media, 71 on radio and 47 as the medium of instruction in schools. That could be astounding for someone belonging to a country that follows a 'more or less monolingual' policy or pretends to be monolingual. However, in the Indian education system, there are different sets of issues for different stakeholders.

For policymakers, it is not just the sheer number of languages that presents a challenge. They have to simultaneously deal with several concerns—the need for mother tongue instruction, moving towards the mainstream language in trying to keep up with technological advancement, preservation of the native languages while also providing space for modern and foreign languages and maintaining a socio-political harmony in trying to achieve all these goals. For the parents, the issue of utility and employability of education is the most important. However, it is the teacher and the students who play a pivotal role in deciding what finally happens to all the policies and principles in the real field. This paper presents some case studies based on the classroom experiences of some teachers from the primary classes of some government schools in Delhi.

A Typical Situation

A typical primary grade classroom of a government school in Delhi has quite a varied population of children in terms of region, religion, caste and language. Among these factors, linguistic variation has the most far-reaching pedagogical implications. Multiple languages are seen as a 'nuisance' not only for teaching and learning, but also for assessment, despite the fact that most studies based on the impact of multiple languages on learning have proved otherwise.

Numerous studies in India (Pattanayak, 1990; Mohanty, 1989; Dua, 1986; Jhingran, 2005) and abroad (Cummins, 1981; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008) have shown beyond doubt how the neglect of their mother tongues leads to acute performance problems among children from the marginalized sections, while encouraging education in mother tongue medium along with the teaching of other language(s), improves their learning considerably. NCF 2005 clearly states that "Education in the mother tongues will facilitate richer classroom transaction, greater participation of learners, and yield better learning outcomes." This observation is borne out in Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) where she elaborates on how one's language is a powerful marker of identity which in turn is linked to learning performance.

Acharya (1984) traces the reason for 26% dropouts at the level of elementary education to the lack of 'cultural content' relevant to the child, a very core part of it being the child's

mother tongue. On a similar note, Jhingran (2005) points out that over 12% children suffer severe learning disadvantages because they are denied access to primary education through their mother tongues.

Present Study

This paper attempts to bring forth the attempts of some teachers (who showed a positive response to the idea of multilinguality as a norm, and the scope of using it in a positive way in the classroom) to use multilingualism in their classrooms as a resource and asset rather than as a deterrent in teaching and learning. The data used here consists of observations and informal discussions on the issue of multilingualism with these teachers, some of whom have been my colleagues.

Case 1

Ms Aruna was a class V teacher when these classroom interactions took place. There were 38 students in her class, about one-third of whom had migrated to Delhi in the last 3-4 years. In her class, she came across at least four regional variants of Hindi, apart from Bengali. She tried to incorporate this multilinguality in her everyday teaching by adopting a holistic approach in all subject areas while focusing on lexical and syntactic levels. For example, in one of her classes, there was a discussion on the various kinds of fuels used in rural and urban areas. She asked her students to talk about the fuels used for cooking food, for driving vehicles, etc., in their native regions. The children came up with lots of examples from their regional dialects. For instance, 'cow dung' had many names such as 'uple', 'gose' and 'kande'. Many other colloquial terms were also discussed in the class.

Case 2

Ms. Shashi had a tough time dealing with some older children (about 5-6 years older than the other children) in her class IV as she herself was quite young when she started teaching them. These children also belonged to a different linguistic community from the other children. They were from Haryana, and the other children could not speak their language. They had formed a separate group, and were quite aggressive even towards the teachers. One day, Ms. Shashi, who happened to belong to the same linguistic community as this older group of students spoke to them in their language. This interaction allowed Ms. Shashi to instantly bond with these students as they could now identify with her, and moreover they felt more comfortable using their language. This incident also had a major impact on the general behaviour and classroom participation of these children. Following this, Ms. Shashi planned her lessons keeping in mind not only the linguistic needs of the rest of the class but also of this group of children.

Case 3

Preeti had a student from Uttar Pradesh in her class, who spoke a different dialect from that of the other children in the class. The student's family had migrated from UP just a few months ago. She did not participate much in the class and seemed lost when anyone tried to interact with her. One day, while on the topic of 'mapping', there was a discussion on what different parts of a house are called. Preeti asked everybody what 'toilet' is called in their homes, villages, etc. The girl from UP hesitantly said that 'toilet' was called 'gusalkhana' in her language. Preeti encouraged her to tell the class some more words used for other parts of the house, repeated the words and wrote them on the board to give her language due recognition. This recognition gave the girl so much

confidence that she started sharing a lot of things from her culture. Preeti observed that she had a much deeper knowledge about plants and animals than her classmates, and she used this as a resource for discussions on these topics.

Case 4

Mr. Akshay had 5-6 languages in his class population, with at least 4 variants of Hindi. He incorporated a multilingual approach in his teaching by way of story-telling and retelling in different languages. He observed that when children narrated stories in their mother tongues, they mixed up many languages (code-mixing). He also tried to make children compare different languages (available in the class, plus English) in terms of their lexicon and sentence structure. He took up film songs and poems from a few dialects to work on reading and writing skills, and found that children were much more interested in writing when the text was contextualized.

Some interesting commonalities that were observed across these case studies were as follows:

1. Giving space to the learners' home language has a tremendous psychological impact on his/her motivation for learning. In all the cases, the teachers reported a substantially enhanced participation from students whose home language was given space, and in one case it even resulted in a much better teacher-student relationship.
2. Incorporating a multilingual approach has a positive impact on the overall learning atmosphere of the class and benefits not just the minority group but also the majority group whose knowledgebase is widened and enriched. Psychologically, it results in mutual tolerance and respect among peers, which is essential for a positive learning environment.

3. A point of concern noted by the teachers was that children in the lower grades seemed to be more open to accepting others' languages and expressing in their home language (if different) than those in the upper grades, typically class V. This acceptance however, was dependent on the teacher's motivation. This seems to stem from the fact that assessment criteria, including the norm of using 'proper' and 'standard' language, are much more strictly followed in the higher grades. Also, the students are more aware of the expectations in higher classes, hence the resistance to using the home language which is considered as a 'non-standard', 'non-exam' language.

Conclusion

The case studies discussed in this paper give us some hope that the gap between the philosophical foundations of education and actual practice can be reduced, and that the education system can become a little more tolerant of the heterogeneity which marks the very nature of Indian society. Though these case studies and similar experiences of some sensitive teachers seem to present a rosy picture for the future, a bitter fact is that this change cannot happen only in the classroom and only by the teachers. This argument is substantiated by the third observation discussed above. Why is it that younger children are more open to accepting variation than the older children? This is because the teacher or the students alone cannot change the whole system, the expectations, the language hierarchy and the feudal mindset pertaining to linguistic inequalities. On the one hand, the teacher is expected to be sensitive towards the multilingual aspect of the Indian classrooms. On the other hand, the written assessment still expects monolinguality, school systems are still going ahead with separate English-medium sections and higher education material is still not available in minority languages (ironically,

even Hindi is marginalized when it comes to the availability of written texts).

This scenario is not just limited to the education system. There is a larger issue regarding the preservation of the 'cultural capital' that the previous generations have accumulated over a period of time. Each day, a number of languages are dying, and this 'linguistic genocide' as Skutnabb-Kangas calls it, is taking place at exponential rates due to the shrinking space of home languages of a majority of school-going children and migrating adults.

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