

Hindi: A Language of Serious Discourse?

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The use of Hindi as a language of serious discourse* has been on a decline in the past two decades or so, coinciding with the advent of satellite TV and the era of globalization and liberalization. This is especially evident in a metropolitan city like Delhi; anyone who has spent approximately two decades of his/her life in the city, and has been linguistically observant, would endorse this.

Let us first see in what contexts and for what purposes the adolescents in Delhi engage with language in their daily lives, besides using it for informal purposes such as conversation with friends and family, and for daily life functions such as transactions in markets, buses, banks, offices, etc. How often do the youth read newspapers, magazines and books? What do they read in a newspaper and a magazine? How often do they explore their college library? If they read beyond the demands of the syllabi, what kind of books do they read? What kind of internet sites do the students visit? What is the nature of their engagement with the internet? What kind of listening exposure do they have, or choose to have through the television channels, radio, college or other forums? If we go by a small pilot study done with the undergraduate students of a college on the campus of the Delhi University, students majorly engage in an informal style of Hindi in their daily life. This may be either by choice in some cases, and in other cases because the public spheres of Hindi in Delhi predominantly involve this style of language. Has the engagement with Hindi in a serious discourse been diminishing in the recent

past? If that is the case, is some other language replacing Hindi, and being heard, spoken, read and written more? Has the space of Hindi in serious, formal discourses been shrinking over the years, or is our use of language, in general tilting towards functionality (functional purposes of daily life) rather than cognitively and linguistically more challenging and richer engagements?

What are the factors behind these developments? Does education have a role to play in this regard? Let us examine the issue under focus from the lens of education.

Position of language in education

Though the centrality of language to the entire educational enterprise is a well established fact, it is an irony that our education system gives it a very peripheral treatment. Language in education is not merely a literary subject, but is also a medium or a tool to understand various concepts of other disciplines. Thus language is not confined to the literature class alone, but science, social science and math classes are also language classes. In the process of acquiring academic knowledge, students also get an exposure to the registers of these subjects which comprise of specific terminology, phrases, etc., that form the linguistic characteristics of these subjects. Students are constantly using the special language of these disciplines by way of classroom discussions and writing tasks. This kind of engagement with discipline specific language not only enriches students' vocabulary but also enhances their linguistic knowledge.

However, it is unfortunate that we ignore this extremely important role of language across the curriculum, and view it as one of the subjects that is accorded a hierarchically lower status as compared to disciplines such as the sciences, mathematics, etc. Consequently, stakeholders of education, be it parents or the school system, unwittingly ignore Hindi as well as other Indian languages which form a part of the school curriculum. However, English has a unique status in this regard because it is a symbol of power, prestige and upward mobility. It strengthens students' eligibility in the job market.

Unless the significance of language is recognized and emphasized across the curriculum, there cannot be an organized attempt to make the acquisition of its registers a part of the learning process in school.

Medium of education

Linked with the issue of language across the curriculum is the issue of the medium of education. There are innumerable studies and researches that highlight the importance of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, at least till elementary level. Also, there are strong pedagogic, political and identity-related arguments that advocate this. However, in India, the issue of the medium of instruction is linked to the issue of class; usually, students coming from underprivileged backgrounds are perceived to opt for Hindi as a medium of education. Private elite schools invariably have English as the medium of education throughout the school years, while government schools have Hindi as the medium. Non-elite, relatively low-fee-charging private schools have English as the medium of education only for namesake. In such a scenario, if students do not get an opportunity to engage with Hindi to carry out

discourses related to various subjects, they cannot develop discursive skills in the language. After all, one of the most fundamental preconditions of language acquisition is a rich exposure to the language or languages. What about the students of Hindi medium Government schools then, who use Hindi as a tool to understand concepts, across subjects, one may argue. Their command over Hindi is marginally better as far as carrying out a serious discourse in Hindi is concerned. If we examine the issue to find reasons for this, it brings us to the third factor that impacts the higher order linguistic proficiency of students.

Pedagogy: Approach & perspective

The nature and quality of pedagogy adopted in schools across the disciplines is a major factor behind students' ability to use a language for formal discourses. There has been a lot of debate about the concept of knowledge, learning processes, nature of language, abilities of children and pedagogic perspectives in the past few decades. However, there remains a huge gap between the entire educational discourse and ground level pedagogic practices. The latter still reflect the age-old principles which view a child as an empty receptacle to be filled with knowledge. When a child enters school, he/she is considered a blank slate in terms of knowledge and language abilities. The language that he/she comes with is often not the 'standard' language, and the knowledge that she has gained from her experiences and surroundings is not considered valid. A child is supposed to learn by imitating, memorizing and practising what is taught by the teacher in the class; he/she does not have much role to play in the learning process. Therefore, a child is required to be a passive listener in order to learn; the speaking has to

be done by the teacher. This is largely true of both the government and the private schools.

The fresh and progressive perspectives on education are not reflected in our classrooms because the curriculum and syllabi of most of the pre-service teaching programmes such as B.Ed., ETE, M.A. Education, etc. are based on half a century old principles discussed above. In a nutshell, this perspective is so entrenched in the sub-conscious mind of the stakeholders of education that children's creativity, individuality and their active role in the process of learning is rarely of any significance in our formal education system.

The culture of reading

Reading empowers us. It gives a perspective to understand the world, and a confidence to interpret it in our own ways. However, the single textbook approach in our schools limits a student's imagination and hinders independent thinking and learning. A textbook is one of the many resources available for teaching, but in our classrooms it is the only material used. In fact, textbooks in India have come to be perceived as synonymous with syllabi and curriculum. Consequently, the dependence of teachers and students on them is so much that textbooks are viewed as sacrosanct knowledge which cannot be questioned. This does not leave any scope for multiplicity of perspectives, nor does it help students to think independently and critically. This is a reality across the subjects including languages. While the problem pertains to pedagogy on the one hand, on the other hand it is linked with another factor, namely, the culture of reading. Our society, in general, lacks the culture and habit of reading. The very fact that our cities have a negligible number of public libraries and that too with poor infrastructure,

is indicative of the sad state of affairs. In the past few decades, the city of Delhi has expanded manifold geographically, but public libraries do not figure anywhere in the planning of new colonies. To develop a love for reading among students, it is important that teachers too are fond of reading. However, in the existing situation, we cannot expect a teacher to be immune to what ails our society.

Conclusion

Since language, besides being a means of communication, is also a tool or a medium through which most of the knowledge is acquired, one of the objectives of language teaching is to help students develop the ability to understand and use the language of formal discourse by the end of their schooling. What needs to be achieved in the terminal years of school is possible if relevant perspectives and well planned strategies form a part of classroom processes. To begin with, teachers must respect the language and knowledge that children acquire at home because all languages, including dialects are equally scientific and rule-governed. In fact, the rich multilingual and multicultural profile of a classroom can be used as a resource to teach grammar, and to link the content being transacted to their social moorings. Secondly, we must encourage children to think independently. This can happen only if they feel that their views are considered valid and their voices are being heard. For example, instead of telling them *the* meaning of a poem, the students can be encouraged to interpret it in their own ways. A text may have as many interpretations as the number of readers. Also, instead of expecting children to use 'standard' forms of language, they must be encouraged to use language in their own ways, expressing what they think and

feel. What is important is not their grammatical errors, but the content, originality and creativity of what they articulate. Hence new parameters of assessment need to be developed. Thirdly, teachers need not tell them everything; a teachers' role should be to help the children arrive at what they want them to know on their own. For example, instead of telling them the rules of plural formation in a language, we can make the data available to them or write it on the blackboard; they have the ability to observe and analyse the data and come up with the rules on their own. Finally, going beyond the prescribed textbook, we must use a lot of other materials and children's literature in the class; a rich exposure to language enriches the language, cognition and imagination of children. However, everything that is read by them as a part of classroom activity must not be linked with evaluation. One can occasionally have sessions in the class when the entire class, including the teachers is reading a text of their choice.

The goal should be to make children into lifelong readers with a critical perspective. The rest will fall in place.

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- * Serious discourse excludes employing language for informal, daily life functions
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Consider the sentences in 1:

- 1.(a) Mohan jumped from the top of the bank.
- (b) Mad dogs and Indians love to walk in the sun
- (c) Ram saw her duck.

All these sentences have two meanings but for different reasons. I (a) is ambiguous because the word 'bank' has two meanings: a financial institution and say the bank of a river. I (b) is ambiguous depending on whether you read 'mad' with both 'dogs' and 'Indians' or with only 'dogs'. I (c) has two meanings depending on how you understand 'her duck'; as 'her book' or as some girl/ lady ducking.

(Adapted from An Introduction from Semantic Theory by Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal, 1995, Prentice Hall, New Delhi, p. 2)