The World of Hindi Medium Students

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Abstract

Language works as a medium to illuminate the world around us. It also acts as a medium for voicing our emotions and ideas. However sometimes, certain language contexts prevent us from expressing our thoughts. When and why does this occur? This is an experience-based paper that touches upon different aspects of language from a sociolinguistic perspective to understand the relationship between language and society. In this paper, I will examine how people use language differently in different social settings. The ideas that I have shared in this article are based on my experiences and memories from my school and college years. Some of the ideas are also based on my experiences as a research scholar while studying for a course paper in which the medium of instruction was English.

I have done my schooling as well as most of my higher education in Hindi[1]. In school, most of the prescribed textbooks and other supplementary textbooks were in Hindi. That is why I had no experience of how difficult it can be to understand and explain any disjunction between language, comprehension and expression. When I took admission in the B.El.Ed. course[2], almost all the study material and books were in English[3]. Like me, my other classmates from educational institutions where Hindi was the primary medium of instruction (Hindi medium) were also distressed by the non-availability of study material in Hindi, especially in the early years. After some time, we made peace with the fact that the study material was only in English and we would have to make do with it.

Still, the struggle to search for material in Hindi continued. We often tried to translate articles from English into Hindi. However, this effort to prepare notes by first translating could not be done systematically and in continuity due to lack of time and too much study material. At that time, I personally did not face many problems because the classroom environment was bilingual.

It is important to understand at this point, that there is no homogeneous category of Hindi medium students; rather, there are different kinds of Hindi medium students. For instance, many students can write and speak in Hindi, and participate in classroom discussions in Hindi, but they can understand lectures in English as well. Most of these students can read study materials in English without much difficulty and on the basis of that, they can write their tests, exams, etc., in Hindi (I was one such student).

There are some Hindi medium students who find it difficult to comprehend English. They are comfortable writing in Hindi and also participate in classroom discussions only in Hindi. Such students face major difficulties while reading English texts. Also, making sense of English lectures is more a struggle for such students than a process of understanding. In the B.El.Ed. classrooms, many of my classmates belonged to this category and hence faced such challenges.

There was yet another category of Hindi medium students. Although these students were more comfortable with writing and participating in classroom discussions in Hindi, they preferred to write in English. As the study materials and various resources were mostly available in English, they used them to prepare their content. They believed that by moving to English, they would do better in higher education. Such deliberate choices contribute towards maintaining the power of one language over another. They also help to understand how "education becomes an important avenue where various subtle processes help in strengthening the language hierarchy" (Saxena, 1997, p. 270).

I remember one of my classmates telling me that although she felt more comfortable expressing herself in Hindi, because of parental pressure, she started writing in English. This reflects how social factors affect language choice and usage. The students who fall in this category have specific problems, such as forgetting English words, phrases, etc., during examinations. Also, they are not comfortable attempting experience-based or perspective-based questions in the examinations, because to attempt these, one has to rely more on one's thoughts and ideas and less on the theoretical content, which they memorize for the examination.

While doing sociolinguistic research on the attitude and perceptions of students in Indian universities towards English and their use of English, Aggarwal (1988) argued that English is a language of

opportunity in India. In fact, 66 per cent of the respondents[4] in his study believed that society assigned great value to English. Also, 72 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that those who do not know English are at a disadvantage. This helps to understand how society in general and institutional structures in particular affect language and its use.

The issue related to understanding and expression becomes even more serious when students do not realize that they are not solely responsible for their lack of comprehension in classroom lectures or English content. Sometimes, language barriers and environment-related aspects also play a crucial part, due to which they are not able to develop their ideas and form a better understanding of the subject. Kumar (2001) argues that the process of understanding and expression gives rise to linguistic duality[5] and a behaviour that shows a lack of self-confidence among Hindi medium students.

This issue is as serious for teachers as it is for students. Often, teachers also struggle in this complex context of Hindi and English medium students. Students have to however be given the reassurance that they can express their thoughts in any medium they are comfortable in. This can be very challenging for a teacher, who has to be sensitive enough to gain the confidence of the learners, so that they can express themselves without hesitation, regardless of their language background. Due to time constraints and sometimes also due to the flow of ideas, a teacher may forget that she had to speak in both the languages.

I felt these complexities of language, understanding and expression as a student more deeply, when during Ph.D. I took a course paper[6] that was in English (i.e. reading, writing, presenting, etc., everything in English). This was the first time that I had taken a paper completely

in English as the department in which I had enrolled for the course taught only in English. Hence, I could not even ask whether I could use Hindi in class discussions and assignments. I was able to use English for communication and writing purposes, and therefore thought that I would be able to handle one course paper in English. My assumption was that since I was keen on learning, language would not be such a big an obstacle. Moreover, I had already experienced the hegemony of English language in higher education. Therefore, I thought that I would expand my language horizon, and decided to face up to my fear of expressing in English.

As part of the course paper, we were given a weekly task of reviewing five research papers published in reputed journals that were related to the chosen theme for the term paper, and mail them to the teacher. I searched for the articles and read them one by one. Before typing the final review draft, I prepared multiple drafts for each article. If I had any questions, queries or any ideas I wished to include in my review, I had to write them down in Hindi first. These were then translated into English, with the help of an Online Hindi to English Dictionary Translator, wherever required.

In the upcoming classes (which were of two hours each), the first hour was kept for presentations, in which every student was given 15-20 minutes to present their review. On the day of my presentation, out of a total of five students, four were from the same department. I put my review in front of me, and after covering the title, the content, the name of the journal, date, etc., I started presenting my review in English. I wanted to explain the paper in my own words since I had understood it well. However, due to the constraint of presenting in English, I had to keep

referring to the text in front of me and reading from it.

During the whole presentation, as my focus was constantly on reading, I felt I was just reading an essay instead of presenting and discussing a review. Whenever I tried to explain something to the class, I had to first recall the words and sentences in Hindi, then translate them into English in my head, and then speak out aloud in front of the class. In this process of thinking, translating and then speaking, I was not able to build a connection between the listeners and myself. In that presentation, I was constantly struggling with mental translation.

I had similar experiences during other presentations as well[7]. Whenever I had to ask or comment on something in the class, I had to first plan it in my mind. I had to write the sentences and questions in English on the corners of the pages or at the back of a notebook, then read them in my head to check if the sentence structure, words, etc., were correct, and then finally, read the sentences as comments or questions in class. This whole pre-planning process resulted in my input and questions being restricted as a result of my limited vocabulary. My classmates on the other hand spoke English with an ease and fluency. It seemed to me as if the mental processing required to speak in English was so internalized in their mind, that they did not have to stop and think about each and every sentence, before voicing their thoughts.

The difference between my situation and that of my classmates can be explained metaphorically using the example of driving a car. When a skilled driver drives a car, she/he does not need to remember to increase or decrease the speed of the car, change gears, and so on. All these processes become automatic for the driver. My classmates were like such expert drivers. On the other hand, my condition was like a driver who was learning to drive. Such a driver has to take care of several aspects simultaneously. She/he has to balance out several things and in that struggle, some aspects get neglected. Sometimes the driver forgets to shift gears, and at other times to increase the speed. That is how I felt during those classes, that in spite of trying very hard, I was not able to express myself in the manner that I wanted to. My ideas came through only occasionally in my oral expression. This inability in expressing my thoughts made me feel as if I had transparent walls around me, which separated me from the discourse and discussions of the outside world and limited me to the struggle inside my mind.

Language works as a medium to illuminate the world around us. It also acts as a medium for voicing our emotions and ideas.

> Understanding and language have a relation like the air and wind. Humans grow their understanding and develop their web of concepts, relationships through language only. That is why in the process of formation of an individual, language works as a medium (NCERT, 2014, p. 10).

The experiences shared in this paper indicate the relevance of the close association between language, understanding and expression. In the absence of this three-way association, not only does voicing one's thoughts and experiences become difficult, but the whole process of comprehension and explanation, which is so crucial to a classroom, also becomes more complex and challenging.

Endnotes

[1] I have a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, and an M.Ed. and M.A. in Political Science from the University of Delhi.

[2] B. El. Ed. (Bachelor of Elementary Education) is a four-year integrated teacher training program.

[3] Some of the essential readings that were not available in Hindi are:

- Berk, Laura E. (1996). Child development. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India.
- Yule, G. (1996). The study of language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kakkar, S. (1980). The inner world. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[4] For the purposes of this study, fifty-two students were randomly selected as respondents.

[5] Kumar has explained this duality in terms of the language divide between the students of Hindi medium and English medium schools.

[6] The paper was titled "Sociology of Schooling: Perspectives and Practice".

[7] Some of the works used to present in the class were:

- Vasavi, A. R. (2015). Culture and life in Government elementary schools. Economic and Political Weekly,50 (33), 36-48.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Conceptions of school culture: An overview. Educational Administration Quarterly, 23(4), 11-24.
- Nambissan, G. (2012). Private schools for the poor: Business as usual. Economic and Political Weekly, 47 (41), 51-58.

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Kumar, K. (2001). Bhashaaur samajik vibhajan. In R. Agnihotri & S. Kumar (Eds.), *Bhasha, boli aur samaj: Ek antah samwad* (pp. 1-7). New Delhi: Deshkaal Prakashan.

National Council of Educational Research and Training (2014). *Samajh ka madhyam*. New Delhi: NCERT.

Saxena, S. (1997). Language and the nationality question. *Economic and Political Weekly, 32*(6), 268-272. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/199732/6/perspectives_language_and_the_nationality_question.pdf