

Language Teacher as a Language Planner: Some Lessons from Northeast India

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Abstract

Northeast India is a treasure house of diversity. Teachers have a vital role to play in exploring the nature of linguistic resources in the community, understanding the choices that the community makes and being sensitive to the dynamics that underlie these choices. In this sense, teachers are language planners, because their understanding and awareness underpin their teaching. This paper elaborates on the argument of language teachers being language planners by discussing a few cases in the states of Northeast India.

To plan language is to plan society.

—Cooper, R.L. 1989

Ideological Moorings

Cooper, in his illustrious book, *Language Planning and Social Change*, after presenting case studies from four different social contexts as instances of language planning, and after examining and drawing from a dozen definitions of stalwarts in the field, offers his definition: "Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes" (Cooper, 1989, p. 45). Cooper further asserts:

"Language planning is typically carried out for the attainment of non-linguistic ends such as consumer protection, scientific exchange, national integration, political control, economic development, the creation of new elites or the maintenance of old ones, the pacification or cooption of minority groups, and mass mobilization of national or political movements." (Cooper, 1989, p. 35)

To this, we could add educational advancement as another goal. However, while accepting that the relationship between language planning and social change was not fully worked out even in theory, Cooper concedes that applied linguistics with its focus on language teaching, and sociolinguistics that seeks to understand language use in society, are the two branches that have contributed most to the formulation of language planning studies.

Language teaching is a multidimensional activity involving three areas, acquisition planning, corpus planning and status planning; codes are not only exchanged but co-created, redistributed, evaluated and corrected too. The social context plays a key role in the design of things, and classrooms become sites for debates on alternatives; and the teacher, an agency of change.

Language Teacher as a Planner

In my view, a language teacher is a language planner, who is expected to influence the language behaviour of the school community and beyond. The decisions on language policy taken up at a macro level impinge on the linguistic performance of the learner. Yet, there are opportunities at the micro level to explore the nature of linguistic resources and to do justice to the learners' linguistic makeup. This serves to further the overall constitutional vision of a harmonious multilingual nation that seeks to safeguard its composite culture and linguistic heritage. All mother tongues are an intrinsic and most valuable part of that quest. According to Haugen (1972), acts of performance will alter the competence slightly.

The teacher seeks to enhance the communicative competence in multilingual classrooms by changing the nature of texts from written to oral and vice versa between languages. These opportunities help children to acquire a variety of codes. When students use a word in their language, it influences the performance of other students. Using multiple languages in the classroom enhances the status of language and the self-esteem of speakers.

Northeast India

Northeast India is a treasure house of linguistic diversity. According to the 2011 Census (2018), of the 22 Scheduled languages, about 5 are spoken in this region and out of 99 non-scheduled languages, about 55 are spoken here. These languages also belong to different language families, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, Tai-Kadai, to mention a few (Bareh, 2013). This region offers many challenges for maintaining linguistic and cultural diversities.

While there are commonalities across these states, there are also important differences. Four of the seven states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya—are predominantly tribal and were not formed on a linguistic basis, for no language is in the majority in these states; English is their chosen official language. In Mizoram, the Mizo language is an equal partner and it enjoys almost 100 per cent literacy. In Meghalaya, Khasi and Garo have official status, but in official work, one may be used more than the other, and their literacy rate is low. The remaining three States, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, are more like the rest of India's linguistic states, with few major languages. In Assam, Assamese, Bengali and Bodo (the largest tribal language) are the official languages. Manipur has Meitei or Manipuri, and in Tripura Bengali and Kok Borok (the largest tribal language) are the official languages. Besides these languages, the states have other tribal languages with varying status in schools. One way to understand the scenario in the Northeast is to proceed state by state, and then case by case, and not be rushed into generalities.

Teachers have a vital role to play in managing diversities in the classrooms. They have to be aware of the demographic makeup of the state in terms of the tribes, their languages and variants and be sensitive to the socio-political context. In addition, they need to be aware of the decisions on language (s) taken by the state, the institutional arrangements on the ground, as well as resource allocations, to plan their lessons. The forthcoming section illustrates instances of the subtle awareness and understanding teachers must take into account in their teaching.

Two Lessons from Arunachal

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 tribal

languages and various dialects. Most languages are still to acquire a foothold in the educational domain. The central government supports the two official languages Hindi and English to create a sense of connectedness to Indian identity. Hindi has become a lingua franca in Arunachal Pradesh. Given the diversity in languages and the need to communicate across them, Hindi has gained both in usage and popularity, even as it has acquired a form of its own. It has spread rapidly in formal and informal domains; many children acquire it as their second mother tongue and some as their first. English enjoys official status, but its usage is restricted to formal institutional setups and the more educated elite classes, as is the case in other states. The concern for the mother tongues, many of which are now vulnerable or endangered, has grown in informed circles, but the actual effort required for their inclusion in schools is still to be realized. As part of the CIIL team and with support from NCERT, I organized a community consultation meeting where all tribal groups and state machinery promised to move forward on the decision of using their mother tongues in education. However, concerted action is still awaited. In our subsequent visits, we went to the schools to talk about the implementation of mother tongue education. I recall two incidents that stir hope for language planners.

The first incident is from a school in Ziro town, where the Apatani tribe form the majority, but where other tribes are also present. In this school, Class 10 students were asked to write a small paragraph in their own language about themselves in any script they were familiar with. They had never done something like this before, yet they managed to accomplish the task. Most of the students chose to write in the Roman script, while some wrote in Devnagari. They read aloud their piece(s), translating them for our benefit. When they were asked to exchange notes with other students, they read those too, with a

bit of difficulty.

When we were leaving the school, one of the students walked up to us and said:

"Sir, everyone comes to Arunachal Pradesh to convert us. Hindus want to convert us, Buddhists and Christian[s] also want to convert us; they all say we are inferior. You are the only one who told us to be tribal is fine, our language is good, our culture is rich. We feel pride in our identity now. We are not inferior. We are equal."

The lesson was clear—introducing mother tongues is both feasible and desirable.

The second incident took place in a very well-managed school in Daporijo, where the majority of the learners were from the Galo tribe.

We entered Class two and faced nearly forty children, all of who had smiles and mischief on their faces. To get a feel of their literacy skills, we asked them to write their names on the blackboard and also the names of their classmates, first in English and then in Hindi. Most of the children knew how to spell simple words. Then, we asked them to translate simple words like "cat" or "rat" from English to Hindi. To our surprise, we found that they had bilingual literacy. We asked them to give equivalent words in their own language(s). They happily began to do so, orally. We could see several similarities and dissimilarities in the words used for cat, rat and so on among languages. Then we asked the students to write anything they wanted in their language. A girl stood up to ask, "Hindi se likhega ki English se likhega?" (Should we write in Hindi or English?). I was thrilled and asked them to write in any script they liked.

What followed over the next hour or so cannot be described easily. They rushed to write the words for body parts—eyes, nose, teeth, lips, etc., and other basic words. Of course, there were some variations in their spellings, and they kept correcting each other as they began to laugh and play. Their joy was evident. The

class teacher was also totally surprised as he had never attempted anything like this. The "multilinguality" that was already present in the classroom came alive and various forms of speech, their relations and equivalences as well as the differences between them heightened the multidimensional nature of collective learning. It stirred the cognitive apparatus of the children, awakened within them a sense of pride, and made them take the lead in their learning. The act of writing became a creative act.

The lessons were clear: Firstly, mother tongues could be taught early alongside school languages, and secondly, scripts were a cognitive resource that could be acquired through different languages. The children had become literate in two scripts and crossed what one calls the threshold of literacy—a point from which they cannot relapse into illiteracy, like learning to swim or ride a bicycle, which one cannot forget (Sachdeva,1992). They could mobilize that competence for writing languages not yet taught. It is our submission that the introduction of mother tongue learning will strengthen the performance of the students in school languages too, as languages work together to harmonize cognitive resources. This is because we discover lexical gaps through comparison and strive to bridge them, or discover alternate ways of coding.

Nagaland

Nagaland was the first tribal state to get statehood (in 1963), largely to quell people's demand for sovereignty after a bloody ethnic conflict. It was also the first to legislate English as the sole official language as none of the tribal tongues was in the majority, and any attempt to promote one over the other would have been seen as promoting tribalism or ethnic rivalry. The lingua franca, Nagamese, was rejected as an unworthy marker of collective Naga identity, especially by the elite, for it was a Pidgin

language born in out group situations, even though it had gained usage in interlingual communication and may even have fostered an underlying Naga unity (Sachdeva, 2001). On that count of acceptability, Nagamese is unlike Hindi in Arunachal.

Nagaland was a leader not only in championing the cause of the Naga identity at a macro level; it also strove to create an egalitarian order for all tribal communities at a micro level by promoting 17 languages at the primary school level, and some even up to high school. The church introduced the literacy in mother tongues as part of their plan to spread Christianity through local languages and as a result, the children became literate in their mother tongue.

However, this effort has now taken a step back as the demand for the early introduction of English has gained ground. A substantial number of the Naga students opted for alternative English in place of their mother tongue. To replace the alternative English subject, the State Council of Educational Research and Training in collaboration with the textbook branch of the Directorate of School Education conceptualized and introduced the Nagaland Heritage Studies (NHS) as a subject area. To ensure uniformity and comparable standards, the prototype textbooks are developed in English and translated into local languages. The older Naga belief systems and cultural values are excluded from the textbooks even though many of the traditional festivals are still celebrated with fervour. This has reduced the scope for creative expression in education.

In urban settings in places such as Kohima or Dimapur where mixed groups are present, Nagamese is used occasionally, but it is not viewed favourably. The challenges for education are manifold and many forms of multilingual education emerge in practice. The language teacher has to therefore be sensitive to the socio-

political context and strive to usher in a more harmonious order.

There are lessons in store in existing institutional arrangements as well. For instance, there are literature committees for each language, which include well-educated members of the speech community and language officers appointed by the education department. They make suggestions for orthographic reforms and even play a role in developing a corpus or body of texts. While the church has created hymn books and translations of the Bible in many of these tribal languages such as Ao, Angami, Lotha, Konyak, Sema, and so on; and the Sunday school gatherings allow children to learn hymns in these languages, the development of the tribal languages remains lopsided. It is therefore important that the language teacher allows the community to guide their choices on forms of expression, orthography and cultural matters

As an example, elaborating on the marking of tones in the Naga languages, the Zeme language officer Pauning Kaikamsays:

In the old spellings the word "tei" was used for three different meanings, pain, eat and do. In the new spellings, the first word . . . with a low tone is now written as "teii", the second is re-spelt as "tyei", and the last one left unchanged as "tei". (Sachdeva, 2001, p. 187)

Instead of using superscripts, the orthography has been revised to acknowledge tones that are common in the Naga languages. Similar changes have been made in other languages too. Writing systems do not have to be over-specified and can function without ensuring the exact fit of sound and written form. Furthermore, the knowledge of language allows native speakers to disambiguate, especially in context. The language teacher can therefore work with the community to provide feedback on such matters rather than lead the change.

Other Lessons

In Manipur, the Meitei language, even after being included in the eighth schedule, has undergone a movement for identity. This has resulted in the community being asked by the new counter elite to give up the Bengali based script which has been in use for two centuries in favour of the Meitei Mayek script. The proponents of the Meitei script believe that Meitei is older than Bengali although most people are not literate in it. This anti-Bengali feeling is widespread among many communities in the adjoining areas of Assam and Tripura as well. The language teachers, therefore, have to teach both scripts to the children in this interim phase.

In certain Kuki groups, children are introduced to English as a medium of instruction with Manipuri and Hindi as their second and third language at the primary level of schooling. In Class ten, children are introduced to their mother tongues in place of Manipuri to avoid competition with the native speakers who will outscore them. They become literate in their language as a result of church-based schooling and use their language as an escape route, but still follows the three-language formula.

The Tangkhuls in Manipur learn a common language based on the Ukhrul variety, whereas many other villagers speak varieties that are not mutually unintelligible, but there are no literacy practices in place for safeguarding their spoken forms. This is also the case with many Naga languages. The tribal identity and its concern for homogeneity can work against the diversity of mother tongues. However, there are counterexamples too. "Chakhesang" a tribe in Nagaland was created as an acronym from the names of three tribes—the Chokri, Khezha and Sangtam—to bring them together. In addition, there are two Sangtam tribes, one living in the northern part and the other in the southern part of Nagaland

and they are brought together under "United Sangtam".

In Meghalaya, the Khasi language, which was written many decades ago in Bengali script is now written in the Roman script and the language is taught up to the postgraduate level. Pnar speakers who are recognized as a separate Jaintia tribe are linguistically clubbed under the Khasi tribe and attempts to introduce the Pnar language are seen as a move to weaken their common language ties with Khasi, and resented.

Dimasa tribe in the Cachar district of Assam, where Bengali is recognized as the official language has found ways to introduce the language in Roman script in English medium schools and may push for the same in Bengali medium schools too.

The Bodos of Assam are a most important case study for they rejected both Assamese and Roman script in favour of a modified Devnagari script to affirm their non-Christian tribal culture. This was also done to assert their connectedness with an Indian identity that is not separatist, as some tribal groups often emphasize is the case with Christian tribes.

Conclusion

Language teachers have much to learn from the analysis of case studies in Northeast India as also researchers and teacher-researchers. They have to be aware that the mother tongue can be used along with the school language and that too any level of schooling. Furthermore, the scripts children know can be used for introducing mother tongues. A teacher also needs to be sensitive to the conflicting pushes and pulls that influence the choice of language. Without taking sides, the choices that teachers make on forms of expression, orthography and cultural matters must be guided by the community. Where orthography reforms are underway, a teacher can work with the community to provide feedback on such

matters rather than lead the change. In the classroom, teachers plan the teaching of language as much as they plan the

teaching of the content. Language teachers are language planners.

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