

## Multilingualism in the Classroom: Some Issues and Proposals

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### **Abstract**

Multilingual classrooms are usually seen in terms of the diversity of languages found in them. However, in reality, the multilingualism of a (language) classroom is much more complex and multifaceted. The present article is based on a study of a few English language classrooms at the undergraduate level, and proposes some ideas for a more nuanced understanding of multilingualism in such classrooms. It argues that the conventional view of multilingualism in terms of the presence of multiple languages needs to be qualified by an 'operative multilingualism' viewed in terms of those languages which are functionally relevant to the classroom proceedings and are in actual use in the classroom. It also proposes that even a multilingual classroom works with a small number of 'operative languages', which may even be perceived as one operative language drawing on all functionally relevant languages.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, multilingual classrooms, operative languages, English language teaching

### **Introduction**

This study is based on the observations and exploration of six English language classrooms of undergraduate programmes, taught by four different teachers, at a college affiliated to RTM Nagpur University. Since the author was himself a teacher in the college, and also taught one of these classes, the observations and discussions accumulated over a long period of time. Though the present discussion limits itself to the discussions and observations gathered more systematically and

purposefully (including recording of sessions and formal interviews) over a period of one-year. The data was collected through actual classroom observation of some lessons, audio recording of some others, informal discussions with the teachers teaching those classes, discussions with students and the first-hand experience and observation of teaching some of the classes.

The key questions which motivated these observations and discussions were as below:

1. In what ways were these classes multilingual?
2. Which languages were found in operation in the classes and how?
3. What patterns, if any, of language use in the classes could be noticed?
4. How do the students and teachers view multilingualism in practice?

### **The Study**

The study involved the classrooms of the so-called 'Compulsory English' courses, which were English language development courses, in three undergraduate programmes of B.A., B.Sc. and B.Com. The size of the classes ranged between 80 and 140 students on roll, but in reality between 50 and 90 students would be actually present in the classes. Each English language class was 45 minutes long and was exclusively devoted to teaching a textbook prescribed by the affiliating university. The textbook contained a collection of a few essays, short stories and poems, each accompanied by a rudimentary glossary and a few comprehension questions. Though it was the language course expected to develop language skills, neither the textbook nor the teaching offered much scope for this, as the classes remained focused on conveying the content of the lessons. Since the final examination also asked largely comprehension questions, which students could answer by memorizing the content, nobody had complaints about the frugal teaching of grammar, vocabulary teaching and language skills that happened in the classes.

All the classrooms observed in this study were multilingual. While the term 'multilingualism' broadly refers to the existence of multiple languages within a community, in practice it can be understood in different terms. For example, multilingualism may imply the existence of more than one language in terms of language use, language competence

of individuals and language situation of a geographical space (Clyne, 2007). Fishman (1980, quoted in Wei & Moyer, 2008) makes a distinction between societal multilingualism (presence and use of multiple languages in a community) and individual multilingualism (individual person speaking multiple languages). A country or a city may display societal multilingualism in the sense that its population uses different languages, but not individual multilingualism if its individual residents are monolingual. A language classroom may be multilingual in both these senses—the presence of multiple languages in the classroom as a community, as well as of individuals who speak multiple languages. In addition, another aspect of multilingualism in the classroom may be the presence of materials, resources and the teaching-learning content in multiple languages.

The classrooms involved in the study were multilingual in the first two senses. Several languages were present in the classroom, including some languages which did not belong to the area. The diverse languages in the classroom included ‘major’ languages such as Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu, in addition to some tribal languages of the area and some local ‘non-standard’ dialects of Marathi and Hindi. In terms of individual multilingualism, all students and the teachers spoke at least two languages, but more typically three languages. Though both Hindi and Marathi were common languages used by most students (and all teachers) to different extents, either Hindi or Marathi dominated the classroom proceedings of different cohorts. This was apparently a consequence of the teacher’s own preference—two teachers preferred Hindi and the other two Marathi in conjunction with English in conducting their classes. The students too largely used Hindi or Marathi accordingly, especially when asking their queries. The textbook and the assessment tasks were monolingual—in English. The programme of study followed the vernacular (Marathi) medium, so the teaching and learning of other subjects took place in Marathi, whereas this particular ‘Compulsory English’ course was expected to be conducted in English.

In spite of some individual variations, a common *modus operandi* of teaching could be noticed in these classes. The teacher would read out a small extract of the story, poem or essay on agenda for the day, occasionally stopping to explain a difficult word or phrase, often in Marathi/Hindi. Having read that small extract, they would then explain

the entire bit in Marathi or Hindi (apparently two teachers were more comfortable in Hindi) interspersed with English. Interestingly, they rarely translated the original text into Marathi/Hindi, instead using elaborations, illustrations and explanations in Marathi/Hindi to explain it. There would be several digressions, as the teacher went into extended discussions of related things, and these digressions would typically be in Marathi/Hindi. Though the teachers spoke for most of the class time, there were occasional dialogues, with the teacher posing short (mostly comprehension-check) questions and (typically the same small lot of) the students responding to them. Occasionally, students would raise some queries on their own, but otherwise student speaking was mostly in response to some prompt from the teachers. The students' own queries were typically in Marathi/Hindi. On the other hand, their responses to the teachers' prompts or questions, usually in single words or phrases and rarely in full sentences, would be in the same language in which the prompt/question was supplied. All conversation among the students would be in Marathi/Hindi. Whenever the teachers 'dictated' any notes or sample answers to questions, they would be in English. Procedural or classroom management instructions were given by the teachers in Marathi or Hindi.

In spite of the presence of several languages in the classrooms, it was found that the entire proceedings of the classes remained restricted to just three languages—English, Marathi and Hindi, or more accurately, to either an English-Marathi or an English-Hindi combination. Generally speaking, two of the teachers followed English-Marathi, and the other two English-Hindi, combination in their classes. While Marathi-speaking students tended to use more Marathi in the class, all others, especially non-Hindi-speakers, were seen to use Hindi. The teacher's use of a particular language combination appeared to influence the students' choice too, with Marathi speakers frequently using Hindi in the class that followed the English-Hindi combination. In terms of language use, all students (who ever spoke in the class) were found to struggle with English, non-Hindi speakers struggled with Hindi, whereas most speakers of Marathi and Hindi were seen to use 'non-standard' dialects of these languages.

Another important feature of the use of multiple languages in these classrooms was that code-switching and code-mixing seemed to be almost default modes of language use. Whether in English-Hindi or

English-Marathi combinations of the classroom proceedings or in the conversations among students on the sidelines, no single language was found to be used consistently and in a sustained way. While reading out a passage from the textbook or while elaborating on anything the teachers routinely mixed or switched between English and Marathi/Hindi. The teacher-students' interaction or student-student interaction was similarly in a mixed code.

### **Analysis**

The multilingualism of the classrooms under observation can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, there is a multiplicity of languages, both as a set of languages collectively found in the classroom community (societal multilingualism) as well as the presence of multilingual speakers in the classroom (individual multilingualism). In this sense the multilingualism of the classrooms refers to more than a dozen languages present in them, though it only implies the presence/existence of multiple languages and not actual use. There is, on the other hand, a different multilingualism in terms of languages in use, which involves only three languages, that too typically in a mixed-code form. As one way of describing this situation, the former may be called the actual multilingualism and the latter the operative multilingualism.

As a corollary of the above, it may also be argued that even if the classrooms show the presence of many languages, only a few of them seem to be operative languages for classroom proceedings. It was beyond the scope of the present study to investigate which factors or causes led to some languages and not others becoming the operative languages in the classroom, but some plausible causes/factors could be the status of the language(s) as the dominant language(s) in the local contexts, the preferences and practice of the teacher, and the ability of the language(s) to serve most of the participants in communication.

It was also seen that the classroom proceedings remained exclusively limited to the operative languages (English and Marathi/Hindi in this case) for the given classroom, and that all participants then stayed with these languages during the lesson. Even those students who had only limited proficiency in the operative languages, tried to operate in them in spite of considerable struggle.

The classroom observations and subsequent discussions with the

students and teachers also hinted at an interesting phenomenon, though one can only hypothesize about it for want of further and more focused investigation. Many of them mentioned English as the language of the classroom proceedings and seemed to perceive that the lessons happened monolingually in English. When reminded about the instances of using Marathi or Hindi during the lessons, they seemed to treat these as occasional and minor deviations in what was essentially an English class. Does this imply that though the operative language of the classroom was a mixed code of English and Marathi/Hindi, the participants perceived it as one language? Does the operative language being a mixed multilingual code have anything to do with this perception?

Finally, yet another phenomenon one could only hypothesize about, since the study did not explore it systematically but only got incidental indications of it, is the presence of multiple dialects of the dominant languages (Marathi and Hindi) complicating the multilingual scenario of the classroom. Apart from the presence of multiple languages, the presence of multiple dialects of some languages seemed to add an extra layer of complexity to the situation. In the interactions with the students it emerged that many students felt inhibited by their 'non-standard' dialects and chose to keep quiet assuming that their dialects would be laughed at. In his study of classroom interactions of undergraduate classes from a similar context, Mane (2020) found that a hierarchy of status between different dialects spoken by the students (as against the 'standard' dialect) led to similar issues of a sense of inferiority, low self-esteem and difficulties in communication, as one would find between English and other languages in a classroom.

### **Findings and Implications**

Though multilingual classrooms are a norm in India, the complexity of the multilingual scenario is not always understood and captured well. This study finds that the conventional perceptions of multilingual classrooms in terms of societal multilingualism (presence of multiple languages) and individual multilingualism (presence of multilingual speakers) (Fishman, 1980 as quoted in Wei & Moyer, 2008) need to be complemented by such considerations as the actual versus operative multilingualism as well as multi-dialectalism found in the classroom, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the multilingual

classroom. Such a nuanced understanding will help the teacher in dealing with the language diversity more effectively with an awareness of which languages are functionally more relevant to the classroom proceedings and the teaching-learning process, and in what ways. Substantial research is needed to understand and theorize about this dichotomy between actual and operative diversity of languages and its implications for education.

As the study finds, even if a classroom has multiple languages in it, it functions around a small number of 'operative languages'. It may even be hypothesized that for practical purposes it is just one operative language, though only in the insiders' perceptions, and though as a code-mixed variety drawing on the dominant and target languages. The functional relevance of such an operative language is all the more heightened by the possibility of it acting as a bridge between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1981), since BICS seem to heavily rely on the operative language in order to progress towards the goal of CALP in English. However, sustained and large-scale research is required in this regard, which may help ascertain the existence (or otherwise) of one or more operative languages, their nature and features, and their role in the teaching-learning process.

## **Conclusion**

This article tries to put forth some proposals to further problematize the nature and practices of multilingual English language classrooms at the undergraduate level, an understanding of which seems important in order to improve teaching and learning in these multilingual contexts. It argues that multilingualism in the classroom needs to be distinguished in terms of actual and operative diversity of languages, since only a few among all languages present in the classroom are functionally relevant to its proceedings. It also proposes that multi-dialectalism in the classroom may considerably complicate the multilingual scenario and may lead to similar issues of hierarchy and status as often found among languages. It underlines the need for substantial and sustained research into operative languages in multilingual classrooms, which can provide crucial insights for developing more effective approaches, materials and policies for multilingual classrooms.

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