

Towards a Multilingual Approach in Teaching English to Tribal Learners

Anand Mahanand & Panchanan Duria

Abstract

In the multilingual Indian context, inside an English classroom there are many languages coexisting. However, usually all these languages are not used in an English classroom by the teachers. At least in some contexts, the learners' mother tongue is completely ignored claiming that it could interfere with their English language learning. In this article we argue that the learners' mother tongue is a great resource, and it can facilitate learning English. The case of the mother tongue becomes very important in the case of tribal learners as their mother tongue is not the medium of instruction and it will not be used in the classroom as the state to which they belong will have a different language to function in. In this article, we document the short-term changes that happened in a classroom of tertiary level tribal students in Odisha where one of the authors was teaching them English language skills and grammar. This article discusses the multilingual approaches used by the teacher and analyses how this approach has influenced the teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: Multilingual, mother tongue, tribal languages, indigenous, classroom

Introduction

Multilingualism has been the soul of India as we believe in the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* or the world is one family. In spite of all these diverse languages and cultures, communication in Indian territory is not impaired. Pattanayak says, "If one draws a straight line between

Kashmir and Kanyakumari and marks, say, every five or ten miles, then one will find that there is no break in communication between any two consecutive points" (1981: p. 44).

Though Sanskrit was the language of the elites in ancient times, there were many other languages that were used by the common people. It is believed that "accidental processes like immigration, colonialism and territorial conquests" also contributed to multilingualism (Mahapatra, 1990, p. 1). There have been surveys on the Indian languages prior to Indian independence and after independence and they give evidence of the existence of diverse languages for all these years. The Census of 2011 recognizes 1369 "rationalized Mother Tongues." In India, "As and when required, Indians add languages to their repertoire. As such, there is a mutual acceptance of the languages used by others, and accommodations made to suit these alternative and varied uses" (Durairajan, 2017, p. 290). When this indicates a great level of linguistic tolerance, when it comes to the case of tribal languages, the matter becomes slightly complicated.

Multilingualism and Tribal Society

It can be said that tribal societies are more multilingual. There are about 613 tribal communities, and they have multiple mother tongues. Referring to the heterogeneous nature of tribal communities, Annamalai (2007) rightly points out, "One important characteristic of the tribal communities in India is its heterogeneity; the tribal population cannot be viewed as a single heterogeneous group. There are 613 tribal communities (Government of India, 1978), with their population varying from just 17 in the case of Andamanese to 4 million in the case of Gondi. They have 304 tribal mother tongues..." (p. 26). Kala (2005) states that there are more than 300 tribes and subtribes in the Northeast. They also have non-tribal mother tongues and contact languages. For instance, in the Koraput region, the Gonds, Souras, Kondhs, Gadabas, Didais and Parajas have their own respective languages and in addition to these, they have a contact language called their own language but all of them have a contact language called Sadri.

The Status of Tribal Languages

It can be noted that despite the multilingual nature of our society, there are restrictions of certain uses of languages. It is a known and established fact that tribal languages are looked down upon by people. They are not

only neglected by the non-tribal population but also by the tribal people themselves. They believe that if one has to move upward, one has to learn the state language and English but not the tribal language. Tribal languages are also perceived as inferior not only to English but also to the state language. The tribal language is, however, the first language of the tribal child. It is also known as the home language or native language. It is actually the mother tongue of the child of the same tribe, but the state language is regarded as the first language of all children subsuming tribal languages. When government officials come for the survey, they tend to ignore tribal mother tongues in the recording. Even if a tribal person says his mother tongue is Kharia or Munda, the officials record the former's mother tongue as Odia but not Kharia or Munda. Owing to the contempt for tribal languages, they are considered unsuitable for education. However, recently there have been initiatives to use tribal languages in the classroom under the Multilingual Education Programme in certain states.

Often tribal languages are not used in the classroom. As tribal languages are not used in the classroom, tribal learners feel excluded. They eventually discontinue their studies. This contributes to the rise in the dropout rate. Disconnecting the first language causes an increase in dropout rates. It is estimated that when 100 tribal students are admitted to Class 1, only 8 of them reaches Class 10.

The Role of Mother Tongue in Education

The role of the mother tongue in education is of paramount importance. The mother tongue is the base that shapes our knowledge, outlook, world view and perception of the world around us. It is the language of socialization in early childhood. Many theorists have advocated that L1 is a major support for learning L2.

Although certain theorists (Lado, 1957) believe that the L1 structure might impose errors in learning L2, many other theorists uphold that L1 helps a great deal in learning L2. Selinker (1977), for instance, states that learners can make a transition from L1 to L2 at the later stage. It is also suggested that learners fall back on L1 when they require support in L2. Rajagopal (1992), in his study, finds that L1 provides strong support in learning L2. Mahapatra (1990, p. 7) points out that the mother tongue anchors the child to culture: "The role of the mother tongue in anchoring the child to its culture can also be seen from the point of myth...the child

is slowly socialised into a system of beliefs and practices through the mother tongue". Thus, the mother tongue shapes the child's mind and orients it towards its culture and identity. In the context of education, Pattanayak believes that mother tongue education is a "matter of right as well as a need for every child" (1990, p. 9).

As Mishra et al (2017) argues

"educating Indigenous/Tribal and Minority (ITM) children (including immigrant minorities) through the medium of dominant language in a submersion or an early-exit transitional programme denies them access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barrier it creates. Thus, it violates the human right to education" (9).

Mahapatra (1990) observes that all children should study in their mother tongue from the very beginning in schools as a medium and as a subject to maximize the learning offshoots. UNESCO (1958) recommends that psychologically, socially and educationally, a child learns better through his/her mother tongue. It is the language through which myths, morals and social codes are transmitted to the child by parents and communities. Children connect to their environment and knowledge about the world through their mother tongue. If it is disconnected at some point, there will be a disconnect in learning too. Cook (2001) opines that L1 can be used initially as it provides a sense of security by allowing learners to express themselves. A tribal child whose "first steps into school are steps into an alien world—a world she barely understands because, somewhere as she walks into her first classroom, the ties are snapped" (Mohanty, 2007, p. 6) and this sheer lack of "belonging" can cause damage to the child's entire learning process. If the learner's mother tongue is used in the classroom to scaffold the learning, we argue that, it is not just a scaffolding device but a culturally sensitive tool for communication that will make the learner feel included in the new "community" called classroom to which she or he has just entered. Using the mother tongue, thus, becomes a more humane strategy to lower the level of anxiety for these unprivileged children who come with many burdens to the classrooms.

A Multilingual Classroom Experiment with Tribal Learners

One of the authors of this article (hereafter referred to as the teacher-

researcher) conducted a short-term teaching experiment with the tribal learners of his college. This attempt was based on the notions of Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) proposed by Cummins (1980). According to the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis:

To the extent that instruction in L_x is effective in promoting proficiency in L_x , transfer of this proficiency to L_y will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L_y (either in the school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L_y (Cummins, 1981, p. 29).

The CUP model underlines that when two languages function in the thinking system these languages engage in interaction through language switching and cooperative sharing. Hence, the tribal learners' language which is their mother tongue should function in this language switching and cooperative sharing was the assumption that made the teacher-researcher design a different teaching plan. The teacher-researcher tried to find the efficacy of the 'customized' multilingual method that he adapted in teaching and analysed the learners' aptitude towards learning when this method was employed.

The study focused on two questions:

- What were the learners' perceptions towards the use of their mother tongue in English classrooms?
- How effective was the employment of the mother tongue in their target language learning?

A Brief Profile of the Learners

The study was conducted among intermediate tribal students in the Koraput region of Odisha. The students who came from rural areas and had tribal languages as their mother tongue encountered problems in learning English. From the teaching experience the teacher-researcher had with them, it was understood that they had anxiety in speaking in English and they were not confident to speak in English even though their grammatical knowledge was good. Another problem the learners encountered was the difficulty in relating to the texts that were prescribed for them, as most of the topics were alien to them. They hardly had any lessons on the aspects of their culture and local history connecting them to their immediate environment. Therefore, their lived experience

inside the classroom and the reality, that they lived through, outside the classroom in their own community differed. This posed inhibitions and made it difficult for them to navigate through their learning process. Learners were from different tribal communities, such as Bhatras, Halbas, Sauras, Parajas, Kandhas and Santras. Most of them were first-generation learners. Their parents came from low-income groups and only a few of them had formal school education.

The Intervention

The teacher-researcher used the learners' mother tongue as a resource in the classroom for initiating interactions. Although the teaching focused on all language skills, the major focus was on the development of speaking skills to trace the implications of the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. The learners were divided into different groups and they were encouraged to find a group leader who was given training to train the peers in language skills. A different model of collaborative teaching where learners were co-teaching was facilitated.

These group leaders who were better than other students were trained separately both offline, and online (through Google meet). Team leaders were asked to show their answers first after their discussion of the task in the group. After the teacher-researcher had checked their answers with some modifications, he asked the team leaders to monitor their respective members' answer sheets. In addition, he started getting the team leaders to make a presentation on the topic taught and encouraged them to monitor their team members' presentations. They were also encouraged to do projects together. The projects were based on aspects of their local culture.

As the learners struggled with their speaking skills in English they were asked to use their mother tongue for giving instructions, seeking clarifications and for similar transactional purposes. Although the learners were initially hesitant to use their tribal language, eventually they began to use it which resulted in increased participation in the classroom activities. Thus, the learners' mother tongue was used in the classroom as a pedagogic tool.

The materials were also taken from the familiar cultural context of the learners and this enabled better comprehension of the content being learnt. As they were able to connect themselves with their culture and

related texts, they were not being pressurized by the cognitive demands that unfamiliar content enforces. The use of familiar materials and parallel texts (Mahanand, 2020) encouraged the learners to participate in the learning activities more enthusiastically. Thus, the teaching sessions that lasted for a month were enabled by the use of the tribal language as a teaching and learning tool and the tribal culture as a resource for designing materials that matched the cultural and linguistic identities of the learners.

Data Analysis and Findings

The teacher-researcher meticulously made diary entries after every single session which recorded every episode in the classroom. The learners' speeches were given feedback and for the feedback also the teacher-researcher used their mother tongue whenever required. The learners were asked to reflect upon their experience of learning English using their mother tongue. Though they were allowed to give their responses in their mother tongue, some of the learners provided the same in writing (See Appendix). The pre-intervention discussion with the learners revealed that they had negative perceptions about using their mother tongue in the classroom. They found that it is shameful to use one's own language to learn English and English was perceived as an elite language by the learners. Eventually, their opinion changed, and they were motivated to use their mother tongue as the use of it facilitated better comprehension and better language output. This does not mean that their speeches were error-free. But, as the study progressed, the learners were able to understand the content as the discussion of the content was largely carried out through their mother tongue, reinforced by the content again being presented in English. This allowed the learners to 'fearlessly' talk to each other, make mistakes and get them corrected. So, the techniques he adopted were instrumental in eliminating both the linguistic and thematic burden of the content. Various aspects of local culture, like festivals, food, and local leaders, were used for discussion and input for speaking and this made the learners stay motivated throughout the sessions. They said that they felt comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences on these as they were familiar with the context.

Discussion

The findings of the study documented that the learners usually have a negative attitude towards the use of their mother tongue owing to the social stigma that is prevalent. English is perceived as a language of social prestige and without any linguistic capital these learners who are from marginalized segments of the society are forced to use English as a medium of learning. This creates impediments. As the research indicated (Mishra et al, 2007; Mohanty, 2009), there is no need to look forward to a monolingual society and the learners must be able to and allowed to value their own language without associating it with shame. Teachers must also understand that how the learners learn is important and the focus should not only be on the product or output of language learning.

The teacher-researchers' diary entries pointed towards the increased level of motivation among the students as they were eventually using their mother tongue which made them "comfortable", as one of the learners stated. Although there were no quantitative attempts made as part of this study to capture the language growth over a period of time, the teacher-researchers' diary entry on various episodes in the classroom threw light onto the increased learner involvement, peer collaboration, team teaching and a good deal of self-learning attempts. This is a continuing study and if it is carried out for a long time, perhaps incorporating more specific qualitative and quantitative instruments to collect the data and more objective analysis is carried out, the findings can be revealing.

Conclusion

The study was carried out for a short span of one month with a cross-section of learners. There were no quantitative instruments used to corroborate the findings derived through the qualitative data analysis. Therefore, generalizing the finding is problematic. However, this study records an attempt of a practising teacher-researcher to a more empathetic way of teaching English without neglecting the linguistic and cultural identity of the learners. The study suggested that the learners' more enabled language can be a resource in the classroom and also offered some ways in which the learners' mother tongue can be used in the English classroom.

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Anand Mahanand is Professor at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

anand@efluniversity.ac.in

Panchanan Duria is Lecturer in English at R.C. College, Kodinga, Nabarangpur, Odisha.
duriapanchanan@gmail.com

Appendix

- 1/ Presentation:- Presentation actually a very good learning process. by Presentation we can make all the student understand not only for that student who is better in english also for that student who are very weak in english. It will make all the student confidence and courage. when our English lecturer Mr. Panchanan duria Sir told me to make presentation on a topic "The Doctor's word" in English in our classroom in front of my classmates, I made presentation confidently on stage.
- 2/ Peer group teaching:- The group teaching is exactly fantastic. when our English teacher Mr. Panchanan duria Sir told us to teach the groups after his teaching, I taught them and I tried my best to make them understand. I explained in our local language. and they got that. so that they could understand the concept easily and properly.
- 3/ Teaching and learning in mother tongue:- I think this step is most effective teaching in mother tongue. is very good for all level of the student whenever our English teacher Mr. Panchanan duria Sir he teaches us in our local language. because he believes that teaching in their local language means they could understand properly the concept. It was easiest and effective way to learn English language. All the low standard student understand any concept easily.