

## Language Ideologies and Multilingual Education: Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese

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### Abstract

Educational institutions play an important role in shaping ideas and beliefs about language (language ideologies). At the same time, language ideologies also affect how education is imparted in the classroom in schools. In India, monolingual beliefs guide policy discourse about the medium of instruction in multilingual classrooms. Drawing on the observations of English and Hindi classrooms in a low-cost private school in Assam, this article examines the interplay of language ideologies and multilingual education in a low-cost private school in Assam. The lack of trained teachers at the school level and an overall apathy towards investments in language pedagogy have made it difficult for students from lower-income groups to develop comprehensive and expressive abilities in English. The discussion assumes significance at a time when the government of Assam is proposing a transition to English medium instruction for Math and Science in government schools.

**Keywords:** Language ideology, English teaching, medium of instruction, regional languages

### Introduction

Language ideologies thought of as ‘the situated, partial and interested character of conceptions and use of language’ (Errington, 2001, as cited in LaDousa, 2007, p. 928) are actively shaped and molded in educational institutions. These institutions are ‘key sites for the production of language ideology’ (Wortham, 2003, as cited in LaDousa, 2007, p. 928). But at the same time, ideologies of language also affect language pedagogy

in these institutions. In India, monolingual beliefs about language underline much of the policy discourses about the language (medium) of instruction in the classroom. Despite the indication of a move towards a multilingual approach to teaching and learning Indian languages in the National Curricular Framework (NCF) in 2005 (NCERT, 2005), the ideas and beliefs about language learning among academics and policymakers continue to be influenced by monolingual assumptions even as some scholars have pointed toward the existence of multilingual classrooms (Jhingran, 2009). In recent times, the multilingual approach to education has generated much attention. Multilingualism is a belief and a practice of language teaching where teachers are expected to make full use of students' linguistic diversity (Agnihotri, 2010). In more recent years ideas about trans-linguaging as a pedagogic practice/strategy, which is centred on the practice of multilinguals and not on languages (as has often been the case), have been widely discussed as an alternative to conventional approaches towards language learning (Garcia, 2009, p. 140).

In this article, an attempt is made to examine how despite the academic advances in language pedagogy and policy rhetoric, the classroom practice of language teaching is influenced by the dynamics of class and regional politics in which educational institutions are located. We examine Assamese medium private schools set up to provide and promote education in the mother-tongue within the logic of for-profit education, to examine language ideologies and how they operate in these institutions.

### **The Context of Assam**

Assam is one of the states in the country where language sentiments run quite high. It has seen many language-based movements and language conflicts over the decades. The language issue has its roots in the early 19th century colonial period and it has continued even after India's independence. While in the early decades, there were mobilisations to get Assamese recognised as the official language in the state, in later years there was resistance to it from different quarters of Bengali and Bodo speakers, creating an ethnically complex and politically sensitive situation over the issue of language<sup>1</sup> (Kar, 2008; Talukdar 2020). From the '90s onwards, along with the growth of private English medium schools, the state also saw the rapid growth of private schools in Assamese

medium that emerged as an attempt to provide quality education in the regional language. Thus, languages and mediums of instruction in schools are sensitive issues in the state. The Three-Language Formula (TLF) is generally seen implemented in the state of Assam where Assamese, Hindi, and English are taught in most schools. However, that does not necessarily translate into the practice of multilingual pedagogy at school because of the complexity of the power dynamics within which the practice of language education has emerged (Goswami, 2021).

### Method

The article draws on the first author's fieldwork in a private school to reflect on the debates about the medium of instruction in a region where language identity has had a political salience. He obtained permission for fieldwork in a private school that teaches in Assamese medium. As part of the arrangements, he was engaged as a substitute teacher of English and also acted as a proxy for the absentee teachers in other subjects. The data presented here is drawn from such classroom interactions and observations within the school. Here the focus is on students' perception of English and Hindi *vis-a-vis* Assamese, which was considered mother tongue by many students.

The school, a small private school, was established in the year 2001 in Guwahati. It follows the Assam SCERT and is part of a network of private schools called *Jatiya Bidyalayas*<sup>2</sup> that follow a common curriculum which is developed by the trust of *Jatiya Bidyalaya*<sup>3</sup>. It is a low-fee budget school with monthly fees ranging from Rs. 350-Rs. 1,500 and is affiliated with the state board, i.e., Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA). Classes are from nursery to 10 and at the time of fieldwork, there were around 150 students, largely from lower middle-class backgrounds. In the school, Assamese Hindu students were a majority, although there were students from other communities like Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, Nepalis, Bodos, etc. As far as the teachers were concerned, it was a strictly Assamese Hindu crowd, largely from upper castes.

### Language Perception in the School

In the school, English is taught from grade four, Hindi from grade five onwards while Assamese is taught from the first grade. The classroom

interactions with the students in the classes of English, Hindi, and other subjects, gave a sense that students from varied backgrounds were comfortable learning in Assamese, not in Hindi and English. This was true for even those students who were from other linguistic communities like Bengali, Bodo, Nepali, etc. English, on the other hand, was the most difficult for them. Hindi was relatively easier compared to English as they had exposure to the language via media etc. Owing to their lower middle-class background by virtue of which they had less cultural capital (more specifically linguistic capital) at home, some students displayed a diffident attitude towards English wherein they had accepted that they don't know much about it and won't get better over time, and hence they had given up on it. Some, on the other hand, wanted to improve their English and tried their best to do so. But overall, English was the toughest language for them, in terms of speaking, writing, and clearing examinations. As the school was established with an aim of providing education in the mother tongue, and there was much emphasis on Assamese during everyday practices like the morning assembly, and in other events at school, students displayed high sentiment for Assamese. The language evoked pride in them. Although Hindi did not evoke any specific sentiment among the students, it was popular, and students were at ease with it. It was English, however, that was too alien and foreign for most of the students and many of them displayed less eagerness for the language. The lack of confidence in English is not surprising given the limited teaching and learning resources and lack of trained teachers of English in a school that caters primarily to an economically lower class of students. The school could not invest in trained teachers and teaching learning resources when it struggled to retain the lowly paid teachers in a low fee structure. The wider acceptance of Assamese, on the other hand, is indicative of the power dynamics through which the standard languages identified at the national and regional levels, tend to acquire common identification among students.

### **Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese**

One of the important observations was that English classes were conducted in Assamese. This practice was followed by the other English teacher at school and was gradually adopted by the researcher. The attempt at teaching English in any other way did not seem to work in the given context. The students did not really understand if taught in

English. They would often say, “sir, *buja nai, axomiyat bujai diok*” [sir, we have not understood, explain it in Assamese]. When explained in Assamese, however, the students would understand the text but they had a hard time replying to questions in English. They could reply to the same question after being translated and repeated in Assamese, but not in English. It was clear that the school could not create an environment conducive to the learning of English in a way that strengthens their comprehension and develops expression. In such a situation students preferred to stick to their language of comfort. For example, one of the students in grade nine, whom most of the teachers described as weak and inattentive, fared poorly in all his exams but in classes where Assamese translation was used, he was able to answer questions from within the text.

Similar patterns were also observed in some of the junior classes. In junior high school grades, the researcher often conducted a general knowledge quiz and the students were very enthusiastic about the same, which was generally conducted in Assamese. But for a couple of days, when he tried taking the quiz in English, there was no enthusiasm. They were able answer the same questions in Assamese, but they had trouble comprehending them in English and were unable to answer. As they struggled with English, they found it boring and showed no enthusiasm for it.

There are a few reasons why this was so. The school faced a perpetual challenge of retaining English teachers. Teachers would come and go and as per the students, many of them were not very good at teaching the language. Absentee teachers and a lack of qualified English teachers were the main reasons the students had some disconnect with English. Additionally, English had very little functional importance for them and it was not used outside the classroom, and that too, very little was used even during English classes. So, students had very little exposure to English.

The students were more at ease with Hindi compared to English. However, just like English teaching, Hindi teaching also takes place in Assamese in the school. Just like the former teacher, the researcher also taught Hindi in Assamese. However, the difference and sharp contrast in learning outcomes for Hindi and English emerged more clearly while doing the exercises in the textbook. In Hindi classes, when the researcher

told them the answers (and marked them in the textbooks) and asked them to write the answers on their own, they obliged happily since they were confident about being able to do it. However, in English classes, students were unanimous that one should give them detailed notes on the Question & Answer section. They lacked the confidence to write the answers on their own. They relied on notes to be handed down by the teacher.

### **Teaching Mathematics and Science in English**

In July 2022, there was an announcement by the government of Assam that from the next academic year, in government and provincial schools, Mathematics and Science would be taught in English instead of Assamese, i.e., the course content of these two subjects would be in English. The proposal by the government seemed to be an attempt to make government schools popular again as more and more students continue to opt for private schools. The justification given by the government is that by teaching Science and Mathematics in English, it would benefit students in the long run, in higher studies, where these subjects are taught in English. When the students heard this announcement, they were quite scared. Most were very fearful and asked if this was really going to happen. The researcher tried to assure them by saying that there is a proposal but it was meant only for government schools and not for private schools. They remarked, “*sir, aamak nalage, enekei bhal*” [sir, we don't need it, it's better like the way it is]. Their fear is understandable. Right now, English is only one subject, one in which they are not very comfortable, and they have to deal with it. If two or more subjects (and that too the tough ones like Math and Science), are taught in English, the burden of English language would be too much for them. Writing answers in English might be too challenging for some students.

### **Conclusion**

The National Education Policy of India 2020 identifies the ‘promotion of multilingualism and power of languages’ as one of the fundamental principles that are supposed to guide the ‘education system at large as well as the individual institutions within it’ (MHRD, 2020, pp. 5-6). Overall, the policy document lays great emphasis on the promotion of the principles of multilingual education and the need to develop teaching and learning resources in multiple Indian languages.

The field data presented here show that monolingual beliefs about language persist in the school. In the school, which is an Assamese medium school, English and Hindi classrooms are conducted in Assamese. This of course becomes necessary in a context where English is a culturally distant entity for the students. The translation method employed by teachers is useful and functional. However, it relies on the use of regionally dominant language and ignores many of the other 'languages' or 'dialects' that are spoken by the students in their homes. As Mohanty says, 'On the whole, education is only superficially multilingual, and it remains monolingual at an underlying level. The official three languages formula is more abused than used' (Mohanty, 2006, p. 279). Plus, when it comes to policy matters, the Assam government's proposal for English as the medium for teaching Science and Mathematics 'reinforces the popular belief regarding English as the language of Science and Technology' (Mohanty, 2006, p. 281). These are monolingual ideas about language. However, a multilingual approach to education offers a 'bridge' to go beyond such conceptions of language. Mohanty further says that in India, English-medium education and mother-tongue-medium education are pit against each other, creating an unnecessary duality that ignores the possibility of bridging the language gap in the existing multilingual ethos of the Indian society (Mohanty, 2006, p. 276). A mother-tongue-medium education need not be a hindrance to learning English. Agnihotri advocates for a paradigm of multilingualism designed in such a way that the 'languages of the children are never pushed into oblivion and English still gets acquired' (2010, p. 11).

In line with Agnihotri's arguments, this article calls for a multilingual approach to language pedagogy. Often people conflate language competence with intelligence which is certainly not correct. As Garcia argues, 'educating children in a language they do not understand usually leads to educational failure' (Garcia, 2009, p. 152). This article has implications for policy in the sense that when new proposals are being made by the government to teach Math and Science to Assamese medium students in English medium language in government schools, the first challenge is to hire qualified English teachers, and also qualified Math and Science teachers who can teach in English. The second challenge is to invest in a language pedagogy that caters to the needs of diverse students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. This must be a priority rather than just changing the medium of instruction.

## Notes

1. Assam has seen a State Language Agitation in 1960, Medium of Instruction movement in 1972, Roman Script agitation by the Bodos in 1974 and Assam Movement in 1979.
2. The schools referred to here are known as the Jatiya Bidyalays. The first Jatiya Bidyalay emerged in 1994 and presently there are more than thousand such schools. Some of them follow a similar curriculum which is designed by the first school that was established.
3. This curriculum is followed by all the schools that are part of the network from class nursery till 8. For class 9 and 10, schools in Assam follow the state curriculum. Standard 11 and 12 are not considered part of schools in Assam. They are part of what is known as 'junior college'.

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