

## Multilingual Education in India: Challenges Ahead

*Shikha Tripathi*

### Abstract

The Indian classroom best reflects the diversity which is core to its social fabric. Students and teachers from different social, economic, and linguistic backgrounds coexist and learn together. The National Education Policy, 2020, proposes multilingual education as the way forward. However, this also poses some challenges like the medium of instruction, the language of the textbooks, and other related teaching resources, and training the teachers. This article discusses these challenges and shares recommendations for the same.

**Keywords:** Multilingual education, children's literature

### Introduction

Diversity is an integral part of the Indian social fabric, which is reflected in the varied cultures, languages, and religions practiced by the people. With more than 20 scheduled languages and more than 1,000 dialects spoken in various regions, India ranks in the top 10 linguistically diverse countries in the world as per the Linguistic Diversity Index released by UNESCO, in 2009.

According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate of India, with a population of more than 121 crores, is 74.04 per cent. The total number of persons speaking a Second Language is more than 31.49 crores (27.27 crores i.e., 86.59 per cent of these being literate) while those speaking a Third Language is more than 8.60 crores, with more than 8.21 crores i.e., 95.47 per cent being literate (<https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/>). This diversity is most evident in the Indian classroom where learners come from varied socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds. In this article, I would like to discuss the possible challenges of

implementing multilingual education in India. Furthermore, I would like to go through the recommendations for the successful implementation of the program.

Multilingual Education refers to the use of two or more languages as a medium of instruction. UNESCO established the term *multilingual education* in 1999 to refer to the use of at least three languages in education: The mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language. Most learners in India can speak two or more languages. Keeping in mind the linguistic diversity in India, the government also introduced the “Three-Language Formula” with the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity. Furthermore, the three-language formula grants greater flexibility and does not impose any language on the state. However, one could debate the advantages and disadvantages of the three-language formula, given that there is a sort of linguistic apartheid in India.

National Education Policy, 2020, strongly supports multilingual Education. It states that “wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade V, but preferably till Grade VIII and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language” (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], p. 13).

It is also well-established that learners learn better in their home language, the language they are most familiar with. Studies show that children learn best and are more highly motivated when the school curriculum reflects their language, cultures, experiences, and perspectives. Alienation or conflict or the difference with the curriculum disengages students from the basic teaching-learning process. Now, this poses some serious concerns. Let us discuss some of the challenges that are most likely to arise in this case.

### Challenges

Given that the learners come from varied linguistic backgrounds, the first and foremost challenge is deciding not only how and what to teach, but also which languages children should learn in, and what should be the medium of instruction. All children should get equal opportunities at attaining school success. As a result, Equitable and Inclusive Education is one of the major objectives of the National Education Policy, 2020. It stresses the need to provide access to education to all so that no child

misses the opportunity to learn and excel because of the circumstances of birth or background. Having said that, the obvious question that arises here is how to decide the medium of instruction that meets this requirement. Furthermore, what happens when the medium of instruction is decided based on the mainstream requirements or market needs? How will the students from the non-mainstream or marginalised groups be able to relate to the texts being taught in the classroom when the language of the textbooks, pedagogy, and assessment are all driven and decided based on the mainstream groups?

NEP, 2020, states that “a multiplicity of factors, including lack of access to quality schools, poverty, social mores & customs, and language have had a detrimental effect on rates of enrolment and retention among the Scheduled Castes” (MHRD, 2020, p. 25).

Children come from various backgrounds and bring along with them funds of prior knowledge, language, and experience which can help in strengthening the entire process of learning. When children feel alienated from the text, or find misrepresentations, they develop incongruency in their understanding (Kumar, 1996). Then, they either seek validation or simply let go of their own. This has serious consequences because this not only results in disequilibrium in the child’s mind but also shakes their entire belief system and confidence and results in feelings of deficit (Labov, 1972). This sometimes also leads to disengagement or discontinuation from the school completely. Krishna Kumar (1993) argues that one of the reasons that dropout rates in India remain so high is that the school pedagogy fails to enable children to become literate. Not only the school pedagogy, but the language of the books, and medium of instruction also pose challenges for the students.

Given this situation, the marginalised will become even more marginalised and lose any sense of existence or validity because they have to completely disconnect from their home language and learn an entirely new system of language that is nothing but alien to them.

The second challenge is the textbooks that are used in the class to teach different subjects. Textbooks are the most prominent pedagogical tool used in the Indian classroom. Textbooks are standardised grade-specific books specially designed for subjects that are used for teaching in the classroom. Teachers depend on and refer to the textbooks to teach in class, plan their pedagogy, and assess the students based on the content

and learning outcomes covered in the textbooks. At all levels of school education, the textbook acts as a substitute syllabus or rather as the operative part of the syllabus (Kumar, 1986). The textbook is not just a source of knowledge but also a source of cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic representation. The topics/content, learning outcomes, illustrations, and images, texts in case of language textbooks, examples, and the language used to teach, all represent a certain segment of society. Often, mainstream culture is represented in textbooks, and they are written in the language predominantly used by the mainstream. The “cultural capital” of dominant classes and class segments has been considered the most legitimate knowledge and only this is included in the textbooks (Apple, 1986, 2000). The books lead to alienating the child by only sharing a very urbane presentation of the content and contexts; using a language that seems quite unfamiliar and standardised to many groups. For example, the language, lifestyle, characters, and setting that are presented in the textbooks mostly reflect the mainstream urban context. But we rarely see a similar depth in the representation of a rural or non-mainstream marginalised setting. The words and expressions used by the characters follow the standard formal format and bear no semblance to the language used by children. Learning without Burden (1993) states that “an artificial, sophisticated style dominates textbook lessons” which further increases the burden on the children (MHRD, 1993, p. 8).

This has its roots in the post-independence era when textbooks were written and offered in English. So, the language used in the textbooks further became a tool of alienation and domination. It will not be an overstatement to say that the alienation and domination did not end with the years. The choices of the mainstream still take precedence on what is to be read, how it should be read, and in which language it should be read.

Labov (1972) in his article “The logic of Non-standard English” questioned the studies being done on the lack of performance by Black children. This lack of performance has been blamed on the deficit in the social, cultural, and linguistic milieu of these students. Several programmes were initiated to bring these students to par with mainstream children. This concept of verbal deprivation was challenged by Labov in his study, where he shifts the onus of deficit from the child. He brings into place the mismatch in the home and school language as one of the key contributors which result in this imbalance.

He further stresses that providing culturally and linguistically familiar text yielded a more conducive result with the black children rather than sharing text which is written for and by mainstream whites.

So, the next question that needs to be answered is what should be the language of the textbooks? National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 states that:

disadvantages in education arising from inequalities of gender, caste, language, culture, religion, or disabilities need to be addressed directly, not only through policies and schemes but also through the design and selection of learning tasks and pedagogic practices, right from the period of early childhood (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005, p. 5).

This implies that it is important to keep in mind the language used in the textbooks as well as the content of the books should align with the varied backgrounds of the students.

This brings us to the third point in the discussion. While it is important to consider the medium of instruction and the language of the textbooks, it is equally important to understand the class dynamics and how the teaching-learning process unfolds in the classroom. Inside the classroom, the most important person to communicate, deliver and transact knowledge is the teacher. The question now is if the language spoken by the teacher influences the language being used by the students. The textbooks prescribed to the teacher follow a standardised mainstream language, and the teacher has to communicate this standardised information to the students methodically and objectively. The students are expected to grasp this standardised information in a language that could be different from the language that they are familiar with. The gap between prior knowledge, language, and experience of the students ends up creating dissonance and alienation in the students. *“Is kitaab ki bhasha bahut kathin hai. Humein samajhne mein bahut dikkat hoti hai”* [The language of this textbook is very difficult. It is very difficult for us to understand it], a student studying in a Kendriya Vidyalaya in a remote part of India shared this feedback with me during one of our conversations. The teacher of the class told me that she has to translate the text into the local language to teach the students, *“Humein har shabd ka anuvaad karke likhwana padhna hai. Warna ye bacche toh kuch bhi naa samajh paayein. Inke maa-baap ko bhi nahi aata”* [We have to translate and make

them write each word. Or else these children will never understand (the text). Their parents also don't understand the text].

So, pedagogy also becomes a major concern as the language to be used in the classroom is also largely either dependent on the language used by the teacher or the textbooks.

This brings us to the fourth point in the discussion.

One important aspect of the entire teaching-learning process is the assessment of the student. This assessment helps in managing the learning of the students and planning the pedagogy. The teachers can be apprised of the learning of the students and plan their pedagogy accordingly. Feedback also helps in stimulating the teaching-learning process. It is important here to state that in planning the assessment and feedback in a diverse country like India, the language used for the assessment and feedback requires deep deliberation.

Furthermore, it is also important to talk about creating a 'stimulating learning environment'. National Education Policy, 2020 states that "curriculum, pedagogy, continuous assessment, and student support are the cornerstones of quality learning" (p. 38). For effective learning, it is important to immerse the students and provide a conducive environment using multiple teaching-learning resources. These could include children's literature in the local language and books that reflect local knowledge and ethos. Digital assets like animations and videos can also be used to make the teaching-learning process interesting and engaging. The issue here is the availability and accessibility of texts suitable for children, especially in the local language (Tripathi, 2011, 2020). One of the findings of my Doctoral research was that there is a dearth of texts in Hindi for children in ages 9-11 years. (Tripathi, 2021). Whatever is available is either a weak translation or a reprint of old editions which have not been updated. The children's book publishers feel that since there are very few readers, they do not feel the need to print in Hindi. The students, however, feel that they are not able to garner interest in reading Hindi as the texts available are boring, didactic, and do not reflect their own experiences. A few students also said that the language used in the texts is difficult to understand and they are unable to comprehend the texts. It is worth mentioning here that the National Curriculum Framework and other documents like the

Yashpal Committee Report all stress the need to use simple language.

During my study, I came across 'Different Tales', a collection of eight books written in regional languages which speak of the experiences of the groups which are not represented very often in children's literature in India. Sinha (2010) says that the characters and settings of these stories are "*neither bland nor stereotypical*" (p. 256).

Let us now look at the recommendations to actualise the benefits of multilingual Education.

### **Recommendations**

The teacher's role is at the centre of bringing all the above elements together. So, it is integral to focus on providing teachers with appropriate training which informs them of all nuances of teaching in a diverse classroom. Also, as far as possible, teachers employed in schools should know the regional/local language so that it is easier for them to connect and teach the students.

Textbooks, reading materials, children's literature, and other learning resources should be made available in the language that the students are most familiar with. Students should be encouraged to read more about the local knowledge and ethos using the local knowledge. Authentic representation is of utmost importance in this case. The interest of children is driven by how much they associate themselves with the story (Kumar 2000, 2009).

The pedagogy and assessment should also be planned to keep in mind the linguistic requirements of the students. However, this requires detailed research to get a deeper insight into the issue.

To sum up, multilingual education is indeed relevant and required for a diverse Indian classroom. A few states in India, like Odisha, have implemented the programme. One needs to further look into the ground to understand the challenges that the teachers are facing and what can be done to overcome those. Based on the data, this programme can be replicated in other states gradually.

One cannot deny the importance of learning the language that the students are most familiar with. However, careful deliberation before implementing the programme is mandatory.



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*Shikha Tripathi* completed her PhD in Education from the Department of Education, University of Delhi. She has earlier taught at a college in the University of Delhi and has worked with Oxford University Press.

*shikhi19@gmail.com*