

Monolingual Ideologies in Multilingual Classrooms: Exploring Tacit Aspects of the Indian Education System

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Abstract

Globalisation has resulted in ever increasing linguistic diversities and a worldwide recognition of the need to support linguistic pluralism through education (UNESCO, 2003). Keeping abreast with the global trend, India's education policy has provided for the cultivation of multilingualism by including at least three languages in the curriculum. However, in reality, India's education system is guided by monolingual ideologies that disregard multilingual realities and promote a form of "monolingual multilingualism" (Neumann, 2015). This translates into separatist pedagogy and practices that keep languages strictly compartmentalised at schools. Different time slots are allotted to teaching-learning of disparate languages. Proficiency in a language is interpreted as the ability to use it without "resorting" to any other language. In effect, monolingual ideologies function to reject translanguaging (Garcia, 2009), or natural language practices of multilinguals, that enter into classrooms. Strategies such as code-switching and translating are invalidated when they occur in spoken or written conversations in classrooms. This article aims to study the monolingual ideologies that permeate the education system to understand their implications for the process of teaching and learning in Indian classrooms.

Keywords: Multilingualism, monolingualism, ideology, classrooms, pedagogy, policy

Introduction

One of the cardinal principles around which the Indian education system is organised, especially with regard to language education, is the maxim that multilingualism should be used as a “resource” in classrooms. Propositions posited in the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020) and the National Curriculum Framework (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005) of the country—that the mother tongue should be the conduit in the process of knowledge construction at schools, there should be no gap between home language and the school language, and children should learn at least three languages at schools—all seem to point to the importance that has been allocated to the multiplicity of linguistic resources of the Indian society.

Despite all, real language practices that characterise language use outside classrooms, such as code-switching and translating, fail to find space within the curriculum. The languages that children bring into classrooms are kept strictly compartmentalised in schools. In the name of developing multilingualism, “parallel monolingualism” in separate languages is being developed through the Indian education system (Cummins, 2000). Mohanty (2009) has stated that “education in India is only superficially multilingual, and it remains monolingual at an underlying level” (p. 279). In other words, although the education system is overtly committed to the goal of multilingualism, it is being guided by a monolingual ideology in the Indian situation. Hence, an in-depth study of the monolingual ideology becomes imperative if one is to understand the status of multilingual language education in the country.

To this end, the present article will begin by examining the nature of monolingual ideology that permeates the Indian education system. The second section of the article will attempt to study the role that monolingual ideology plays at the level of policy with regard to language education. The third section will analyse the manifestations of hegemonic monolingual ideology to understand how it affects the process of teaching and learning of languages within classrooms. The last section will conclude by emphasising on the need of departing from monolingual ideologies and on pluralising pedagogical practices so that they reflect the natural language practices of multilingual Indians.

Monolingual Ideology that Guides Us

The term ideology refers to a system of ideas that relates, often in covert ways, to a specific social group, religion or political organisation. The monolingual ideology that defines the character of language education at various levels in multilingual contexts like India relates to the linguistic dominance of monolingual western societies. This ideology takes the linguistic practices of monolinguals, such as their ability to function in a single language only in each and every domain of their life, as the criteria to assess the value that could be attributed to a multilingual level of proficiency in a language. Garcia (2009) argues that an underlying assumption of the monolingual ideology views multilinguals as a simple aggregate of two or more monolinguals undermining thereby the linguistic resources of multilinguals. The ideology not only overlooks the linguistic competences that are unique to multilinguals, but also functions to suppress them effectively by labelling them as “corruption” of language (Matras, 2009). As Shohamy (2009) notes, monolingual ideologies are mechanisms that function in tacit ways to “affect, create and perpetuate de facto monolingual policies” (p. 175) while rejecting multilingualism in schools. The status that is generally accorded to code-switching best exemplifies the impact that monolingual ideology renders to multilingual competences. Pallavi (2016) posits that despite the conclusive evidence provided by research studies that establishes the grammatical and pragmatic nature of code-switched bilingual utterances, popular perceptions still equate code-switching with language corruption. In fact, code-switching as a natural language practice that multilinguals use in their everyday contexts is not accorded any regard in these perceptions due to dominant monolingual ideologies.

Shohamy (2009) argues that these ideologies work in tacit ways to affect language practices through mechanisms such as declared policies (of promoting certain languages as national), language education, language tests, language in public spaces and language myths. Focusing specifically on the mechanism of language education, we will attempt to understand at what levels and how multilingual education policy of India is being affected by hegemonic monolingual ideologies in the following sections of this article.

Indian Policy and Monolingual Ideologies

The impact of monolingual ideologies can be seen, first and foremost, on the language education policy of India (MHRD, 2020). The monolingual underpinnings of India's multilingual education reflect in the fact that its policy aims to develop proficiency of students in at least three separate languages, which are, the first language, second language, and English, through education at school. The policy can be criticised on two accounts. Firstly, concepts like mother tongue, first language, and second language, around which the policy has been structured, find their origin in monolingual societies wherein languages are learnt sequentially; the validity of these concepts in multilingual situations where children acquire many languages concurrently is contentious. Garcia (2009) argues that within multilingual contexts:

categories such as first language (L1) and second language (L2), base and guest languages, host language and borrowing languages, are not in any way useful...In the linguistic competencies of the twenty-first century, bilingualism involves a much more dynamic cycle where language practices are multiple and ever adjusting in the multilingual, multimodal (and technology-enabled) terrain of the communicative act. (p. 53)

Structured in terms of first language, second language and third language, the Indian multilingual education policy not only overlooks the fact that these terms do not hold any relevance in multilingual contexts like India where several languages are acquired concurrently by children in their early years, it also ignores the multimodalities and hybrid structures that define the nature of language use specifically in today's global world.

Secondly, the assumption that monolingual ideology makes and perpetuates, which states that languages are separate systems that are independent from one another, is also contentious. A number of scholars have questioned such a presumption in the field of linguistics (Pennycook, 2010; Garcia, 2009; Cummins, 2000; Muhlhauser 1990; Lewis et al., 2012). Despite ample evidence that conclusively establishes that a considerable amount of transfer of skills takes place from one language to another, it is due to dominant monolingual ideologies that the goal of language teaching, as defined in policy documents, remains limited to developing separate competence in distinct languages. Canagarajah

(2011) argues that “multilingual competence...doesn’t consist of separate competencies for each language, but a multicompetence that functions symbiotically for the different languages in one’s repertoire” (p. 1). Cummins (2000) contends in the favor of common underlying language proficiency (CULP) that remains available to the different languages and assists in their development. This common underlying proficiency ensures that cognitive and academic skills that are learned in relation to one language are transferred to another language during the process of learning the latter. However, the Indian policy of language education does not seem to give regard to a multilingual person’s capacity of moving back and forth between languages or to their ability to transfer cognitive and academic skills from one language to another.

At the level of pedagogy, the inclination of India’s education system towards monolingualism is also indicated in its advocacy for the communicative approach and the direct method of language teaching. The communicative model leads teachers to teach a target language by encouraging it as the sole medium of communication in the classroom. The direct method shuns the use of native languages in classrooms by arguing that a language is best learnt when students are taught directly in that language. These methods are characterised by the emphasis they put on the use of the target language as the means of communication, and on the avoidance of the use of any other language in classrooms (Mart, 2013). In Indian classrooms, they lead teachers to put on the garb of a monolingual speaker/educator in order to ensure that students are provided with maximum exposure to the target language (Menon & Pallavi, 2022). This policy does not only neglect the languages that students know prior to learning of the target language, it also requires multilingual teachers to “play monolingual” while teaching in classrooms, jeopardising their multilingual identities. Hence, although India follows a multilingual education programme by the virtue of including more than a single language in its curriculum, it is being guided by a monolingual ideology that interprets multilingualism from monolinguals’ viewpoint and promotes monolingual’s way of using language.

Monolingual Ideologies and Classroom Practices

The hegemonic monolingual ideologies that dominate the Indian education policy in tacit ways translate into separatist pedagogies

and practices that keep languages strictly compartmentalised within classrooms. Separate time slots are allotted to teaching and learning of different languages at schools. Separate teachers, who are considered trained “experts” of particular languages, are employed to teach those languages. Different textbooks are provided to the students for different languages. Students are similarly asked to maintain separate notebooks for working on disparate languages from grade one onwards. Although teachers might often shuttle between the (major) language(s) her students know and the target language in spoken conversations under the assumption that the use of students’ language(s) will facilitate learning, such mixing is not allowed to occur in writing tasks. One of the lessons that students learn at school is that they need to segregate languages especially in formal educational contexts.

Hence, the monolingual ideology that dominates the Indian education system comes to undermine translanguaging practices that enter into Indian classrooms with multilingual students and teachers. The term translanguaging refers to the discursive practices that multilinguals use in their everyday conversations (Garcia et al., 2006). Garcia (2009) argues that the language practices of multilinguals cannot be analysed in terms of separate languages that they know; multilinguals are always more than an aggregate of the monolinguals of the same languages. In other words, multilinguals have at their disposal, linguistic systems and strategies that are never available to monolinguals. For instance, the capacity to “shuttle” (Canagarajah, 2013) between languages, or to code-mix/switch, is a strategy that is unique to bi/multilinguals. Analyzing multilingual competence from a monolingual perspective overlooks such capabilities of multilinguals. Indian classrooms that follow a separatist approach towards teaching and learning of languages are being tacitly guided by monolingual ideologies, and do not provide space for such real language practices of multilinguals in classrooms.

Garcia (2009) argues that it is a common historical practice “to associate a nation with a single language” (p. 38) under the “one nation-one language” approach in the western world. She quotes Pennycook (2007) to argue that the hegemony of the monolingual world has resulted in administrative assignment of “constructed” languages in the multilingual populations of the colonised countries. The argument explains the case of India where states, which are multilingual to the grass-root level, are allocated with a single local language that functions as the official

language, along with the dominant language English (which serves as the link language between different states and the centre). The intersection of languages with education complicates the issue furthermore since education, by its very nature, establishes as a norm what it includes in the curriculum while rejecting that which is not included (Pallavi, 2021). Since the multilingual education policy of India sets goals for learning distinct languages, it promotes arbitrary segregation between languages as real distinctions, invalidating all the fluid and dynamic multilingual practices that are located at the interfaces of these “distinct” languages.

The dominance of tacit monolingual ideology that has shaped the Indian curriculum (for instance, through the promotion of the direct model of language teaching) leads teachers to suppress their own as well as students’ multilinguality in classroom contexts. The situation is not unique to India; a pioneer study conducted in Chinese and Gujarati community language schools across the UK (Creese & Blackledge, 2010) similarly shows that code-switching by teachers is most often repented/ accompanied by shame when they occur in formal conversations in multilingual classrooms. In the Indian context, teachers attempt to refrain from it due to the inclination of the policy towards the direct method and communicative approach to language teaching that are often prescribed by authorities and are to be diligently followed, especially in English medium private schools. The prestige and the social motivation to learn English function to add a multitude of dimensions to the debate. In a rush to develop in their students the ability to speak in English fluently, schools attempt to give maximum exposure to the language, ignoring students’ knowledge and exposure of other languages (or linguistic practices). Some private schools even punish students for speaking any other language than English in classroom situations by enforcing fines.

Lastly, assessment plays a crucial role in furthering monolingual ideology by reaffirming arbitrary boundaries between languages and by rejecting, in effect, students’ multilingualism in a tacit way in the Indian education system. Students have to take separate exams to attest the level of their proficiency in different languages. These examinations are conducted on separate days at the school level. In case of competitive or entrance examinations, that are taken to assess students’ proficiency before entering an academic or professional field at higher levels, separate sections of the same paper may cater to different major languages. As it has been already stated, proficiency in a language, in the Indian

context, is interpreted as the ability to use it like monolinguals, that is, as the ability to use it exclusively in each and every domain of one's life. Setting such a parameter of assessment for evaluating linguistic competence ignores entirely the ways multilinguals use their languages in multilingual societies like India.

Therefore, the system ascertains the monolinguals' way of using language as the norm and demerits multilingualism by the way of conducting assessment in distinct languages. The ability to function effectively in multilingual contexts, by using several languages in an integrated manner through translanguaging in different domains of one's life, does not seem to be accorded any worth within the Indian system of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the monolingual ideology that dominates the Indian education system is pervasive since it functions to affect the education system at various levels. Although the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) and the NEP 2020 of India states that multilingualism is a resource that should be utilised and developed within classrooms, it is not being supported within India's education system. Rather than being based on real language practices of multilingual Indians, the education system of India is structured on the basis of hegemonic monolingual ideology that perpetuates monolingual ways of using languages in a tacit manner, rendering invalid the linguistic practices of multilingual students and teachers in multilingual Indian context. It can, therefore, be concluded that despite the recognition that the diversity of languages has been given in the domain of education, educational policies, pedagogies and practices that are followed within classroom situations have not been pluralised. The education system of India needs a fundamental restructuring so that real language practices of multilingual Indians are furthered through education and are utilised as a true resource in classroom situations.

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