

Mother-Tongue Based Second Language Instruction In The Indian Rural Multilingual Context

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Abstract: The system of education in India, neglects the most powerful resource that a child comes to school with, that is, her mother tongue, and in the process fails to enable her to a life of choice; rather, it fails to develop the human resources and leads to cumulative disadvantages. Exclusion of mother tongues in education limits access to resources and perpetuates inequality by depriving language communities of linguistic human rights, democratic participation, identity, self-efficacy, and pride. In case of the disadvantaged groups in India, linguistic discrimination forms the core of their capability deprivation through educational and social neglect which contribute to their poverty in a vicious circle. It is necessary to realise that mother tongue in education is not a problem; it is the solution.

Linguistic and cultural discrimination, arising out of prevalent inequalities, is central to the relationship between illiteracy and educational failure, lack of freedom, capability deprivation and poverty. While education is the enabling factor for economic development, mother tongue is the enabling factor for access to quality education. Mismatch between home and school languages and neglect of mother tongues force the linguistic minority children in India into subtractive language learning in the form of submersion education in the dominant language and leads to poor educational achievement reinforcing inequality and leading to capability deprivation. Educational failure, at least partly due to the systematic exclusion of mother tongues, is clearly reflected in the economic under-development, and general poverty of the disadvantaged groups in India, which evidently is a complex multidimensional phenomenon.

Educational models for indigenous and minority children which use mainly dominant languages as languages of instruction can have extremely negative consequences because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers they create. As has been pointed out, their languages are weakened by marginalisation and exclusion from education and other instrumentally significant domains and then stigmatised as weak and inadequate justifying further exclusion. This results in the achievement of their right to education chimerical by preventing access to education. The paper advocates mother tongue-based multilingual education in the primary grades, ending with a discussion of the findings vis-à-vis capability deprivation and incomprehensibility leading to high 'push-out' rates at the primary level and concludes with a call for using the mother tongue of learners as a resource for the teaching-learning of English in the primary grades, especially in rural areas.

Keywords: mother tongue, cultural capital, multilingual context, disadvantaged groups, linguistic and cultural discrimination, linguistic minority children, subtractive language learning, submersion education, dominant language, capability deprivation, languages of instruction, marginalisation and exclusion, mother tongue-based multilingual education.

I. INTRODUCTION

If we're seriously interested in education for freedom as well as for the opening of cognitive perspectives, it is also

important to find a way of developing a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community. For this to happen, there must of course be a new commitment to intelligence, a new fidelity in

communication, a new regard to imagination. It would mean the grant of audibility to numerous voices seldom heard before and, at once, an involvement with all sorts of young people being provoked to make their own the multilinguality needed for structuring of contemporary experience and thematizing lived worlds.

Maxine Greene, 1988: 127

Multilingualism can be defined in many ways but basically it refers to the ability to use more than two languages. While discussing bilingualism and multilingualism, a basic distinction is between the individual and societal level. At the individual level, the speaker's competence to use two or more languages is referred to as bilingualism and multilingualism. At the societal level, the terms bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the use of two or more languages in a speech community and it does not necessarily imply that all the speakers in that community are competent in more than one language.

As there are between 5,000 and 7,000 languages in the world and only about 200 independent states, multilingualism is indeed a very common phenomenon. More languages are spoken in the following countries: Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Nigeria, India and Mexico. The impression that multilingualism is not a common phenomenon is created by the governments of many countries which give official recognition to only one or some of the languages spoken in the country. In fact, it would be difficult to find a country which is completely monolingual because multilingualism is the rule not the exception.

The use of the learners' mother tongue as the medium of instruction is generally referred to as mother tongue instruction. Additionally, it can refer to L1 as a subject of instruction. In the early years, mother tongue is considered to be an important component of quality education. According to the view of experts, mother tongue instruction should incorporate both the teaching of and the teaching through this language. Though widely used, the term 'mother tongue', may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements: the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language(s) one uses most. 'Mother tongue' may also be referred to as 'primary' or 'first language'. In policy statements and in the general discourse on educational issues, the term 'mother tongue' is commonly used.

It is important to note that the use of the term 'mother tongue' often fails to discriminate between all the variants of a language used by a native speaker, ranging from hinterland varieties to urban-based standard languages used as school mother tongue. A child's earliest first-hand experiences in native speech do not necessarily correspond to the formal school version of the so-called mother tongue. Learning in a language which is not one's own provides a double set of challenges, apart from the challenge of learning a new language, there is also the challenge of learning new knowledge contained in that language.

Research has shown a positive correlation between multilingual language proficiency and academic achievement by emphasising that multilingualism leads to greater cognitive flexibility and social tolerance. There is a need of weaving

theory with practice so that the multilingual classrooms in India can actually be developed as a resource and children do not feel marginalised merely on account of language. This would go a long way in mainstreaming the linguistic minority children and preventing indigenous languages from dying out. Studies demonstrate that learning is most effective when the instruction is received in the language the learner knows best. Multilingual education (MLE) makes quality education possible by adapting conventional instructional methods and materials to fit a local culture. It creates a bridge over the cultural and linguistic barriers that block minority language speakers from learning and living within the wider language and culture.

Learners use their own language for learning in the early grades, while also learning the official language as a classroom subject in multilingual education programmes (MLE) that start with the mother tongue. This enables them to meet their broader multilingual goals while retaining their local language and culture by creating an instructional bridge between the community language and the language of wider communication. It results in the growth of self esteem, and a community that is better equipped to become literate in languages of wider communication.

II. LEARNING OF THE SECOND LANGUAGE - ENGLISH (L2) IN THE INDIAN RURAL MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

Language is not only a tool for communication and knowledge, but also, a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group. Respect for the languages of persons belonging to different linguistic communities therefore is essential to peaceful cohabitation. This applies both to majority groups, to minorities (whether traditionally resident in a country or more recent migrants) and to indigenous people. Claims for language are among the first rights that minorities have voiced when there have been situations of political change and evolution. Such claims for linguistic rights range from the official and legal status of the minority and indigenous language, to language teaching and use in schools and other institutions, as well as in the media.

The aims of language education are governed by different needs and concerns of a curricular framework. A curricular content presents textbook developers the scope for designing materials to enable the teachers to move beyond the confines of the textbook to include examples from the immediate surroundings of the learners. A good syllabus should help the learners attain proficiency in the language/s in different social settings. The state run schools should ensure that the curriculum provides adequate exposure to the learners in terms of language and materials (input) that would present the language in contexts through authentic texts (Krashen 1985). Tasks and activities should enable children to engage with the language and interact and develop their communication skills.

The language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the educational system is the language of instruction in or out of school. A recurrent challenge in the development of quality education is the choice of the language or the languages of

instruction (educational policy might recommend the use of several languages of instruction). In comparison to some countries which opt for one language of instruction, often the official or majority language, others have chosen to use educational strategies that give national or local languages an important place in schooling. Speakers of mother tongues, which are different from the national or local language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system similar to the disadvantage in receiving instruction in a foreign official language.

The language of instruction in school is the medium of communication for the transmission of knowledge. This is different from language teaching itself where the grammar, vocabulary, and the written and the oral forms of a language constitute a specific curriculum for the acquisition of a second language other than L1. Learning another language opens up access to other value systems and ways of interpreting the world, encouraging inter-cultural understanding and helping reduce xenophobia. This applies equally to minority and majority language speakers.

To make the teaching-learning scenario rural learner centered, the language curriculum should:

- ✓ Acquire a holistic approach to language planning in which English language education has a complementary and supplementary role in the whole of language education.
- ✓ Adopt multilingualism as a practice for the learning of languages and other subjects to enable the learners to relate to the context of teaching and associate their life experiences outside the school with the classroom happenings. In this manner, the home languages of children could be used as an invaluable resource for the teaching-learning of languages and other content subjects (NCF 2005).
- ✓ Create an environment conducive to (English) language learning in the classroom and to enable the learners to use these languages for different purposes outside the classroom. Bilingual/multilingual teachers who are proficient in the mother tongue(s) of the learners and English should be employed for this purpose. Activities and assignments that give opportunities to the children to use languages to explore the world outside the textbook and the classroom should be exploited. Newspapers, magazines, radio and other audio-visual aids should be used for this purpose.

The way languages are taught is constantly changing, and may vary considerably from one country to another or even within the same country. Much depends on the prevailing concept of language and language teaching paradigms, as well as on the role that is assigned to the language that is taught.

III. A DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AREA IN ITS MULTI-ETHNIC AND MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

Kahalgaon was formerly known as Colgong during the British rule. It is a town and a municipality in Bhagalpur district in the state of Bihar, India. Kahalgaon, is named after Kohal Rishi, popularly known in The Mahabharata as the father of the saint named Astravakra. Astravakra was a great saint who got his body Vakara from eight places so he was

named as Astravakra. He set his father free from the jail of the king by winning a contest on Shastra.

Kahalgaon is a part of Bhagalpur District (3rd largest city in Bihar). It is about 30 km east of Bhagalpur. It is located at 25.27°N 87.22°E having an average elevation of 16 metres (52 feet) and is situated on the banks of the Ganga river. The Tomb of Mahmud Shah, the last independent king of erstwhile Bengal, who died here a few days after his army was defeated by Sher Shah is located in Kahalgaon. SSV college which is a degree college, was the main stock center of business of indigo, used for white cloth at the time of British rule in India.

Kahalgaon was the education hub in the Middle Ages. It is located close to the Vikramasila University which was one of the two most important centers of Buddhist learning in India during the Pala dynasty, along with Nalanda University. In response to a supposed decline in the quality of scholarship at Nālandā, Vikramasīla was established by King Dharmapala. The renowned pandita, Atisha, is sometimes listed as a notable abbot.

In the vicinity of the town, stands the thermal power project from the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), known as "Kahalgaon Super Thermal Power Project" (KhSTPP) which is located at a distance of approximately 3 km. The project has an approved capacity of 2340 MW in two stages. At present, the project supplies power to the states in the Eastern, North East, Western and Northern Region with an installed capacity of 1840 MW. The recent approval for expansion of the additional capacity to the tune of 710 MW is being undertaken in stages. In comparison to the first stage that has four units of 210 MW capacity each, the second expansion stage has three units of 500 MW.

Arrival of world-class infrastructure, healthcare and education, which would have taken years to reach to people otherwise has been made possible by the establishment of NTPC in the town. Kahalgaon now enjoys the luxury of the best. Education has become a front-runner in the normal routine and the setup has created enough jobs and businesses around itself leading to a confluence of different cultures and languages, such as, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magadhi and Bengali. The townships of NTPC are wonderfully planned, with lush greenery. Apart from housing for employees, it has parks, shopping complexes, clubhouses, stadium and transit-camps. Kahalgaon thus enjoys remarkable peace.

As per the Census of India 2001, Kahalgaon has a population of 22,110. Males constitute 53% of the population and females 47%. Kahalgaon has an average literacy rate of 57%, lower than the national average of 59.5%: male literacy is 63% and, female literacy is 50%. 17% of the population is under 6 years of age. (Population 291,823 as per census 2011.) Angika is the local dialect and is spoken by the majority. It is an Indo-Iranian language of the Anga region of India, a 58,000 km² area approximately that falls within the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Hindi, Urdu, and English are also spoken by different sections of the population. Besides India, Angika is spoken in the Terai region of Nepal. It belongs to the Eastern Indo-Aryan subgroup, which also includes Bengali, Assamese and Odia.

The minority groups of Kahalgaon associate themselves with Angika to produce and access culture in their own language, the language which they consider to be of particular

significance to their identity. It is this language with which these groups identify themselves and around which their group identity is constructed. It is a language in which all individuals understand and are able to access knowledge and means of communication. The association individuals have with the language either in terms of communication or comprehension plays a vital role in constructing their identity by enabling them to use their mother tongue as an invaluable cultural capital and linguistic resource.

Angika is considered as one of the oldest languages of the world. The evidences of oldest form of written Hindi literatures are available in Saraha's Angika poetry of 800 A.D. according to Pundit Rahul Sankritiyayan. The first poet of Hindi literature, Saraha was also the first poet of Angika Language and literature. Saraha belongs to the 8th century, and is the first poet whose poetry is available in the written form. Pundit Rahul Sankritiyayan has given the name Angika to the language of Ang region which was previously known as Chhika-Chhiki, Aangi, Surjapuri, Angikar, Chheka-Chhiki, Chhai-Chhow, Bhagalpuri, Chekari, Gayle-Gayli and Thethi.

IV. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Advocating mother tongue based multilingual education in the primary grades, the present study is based in Kahalgaon, a town and a municipality in Bhagalpur district in the state of Bihar, India. The study began with a preliminary research where the main objective was to collect information on the status of the languages used in the community, primarily the regional language Angika, listed as a vulnerable language by the UNESCO and a threatened language by the Ethnologue, the first language L1 (Hindi) and the second language English (L2). 24 language teachers and approximately 1450 learners of primary grades (I – V) of ten government schools of Kahalgaon under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) were included in the study.

Language Use Survey was used with the teachers to explore their linguistic environment where the focus was on eliciting information on literacy skills in their mother tongue/local language and the ways in which the mother tongue/local language is used in the community. Literacy Attitudes Survey was conducted with the teachers to explore their attitudes towards mother tongue/local language literacy and national/official language literacy. The survey helped to collect information on the availability of literature in the mother tongue/local language and to identify the issues, themes, and topics that interest the teachers to aid material production in the mother tongue/local language.

Teacher Questionnaires were used to explore the community and commercial uses of literacy in the mother tongue/local language. The questionnaires provided important information about the educational uses of literacy in the mother tongue/local language, vis-à-vis, the availability of written material in the mother tongue/local language. Informal Discussions with the teachers focused on the importance of mother tongue education in the primary grades. Classroom Observations were used to elicit information about the teaching-learning pedagogy in the schools, Oral Tasks and Role Play to assess the linguistic level of the learners in their

mother tongue and the languages of instruction – Hindi and English.

Subsequently, analysis of the English language textbooks was undertaken to identify the grammatical/linguistic focus and themes in grades II – V as English is introduced from grade II in the schools under study. Since the focus on the lower primary grades (I – III) is on the acquisition of basic grammatical concepts such as parts of speech and vocabulary development, comprising an integral part of language development, for development of grammatical skills, learners' mother tongue - Angika was used as a cultural and linguistic resource to develop materials to facilitate the acquisition of the grammatical concepts in English. For the upper primary grades (IV and V) themes in the English textbooks were identified to develop some materials in the learners' mother tongue to enable them to transfer their learning from the mother tongue to English.

The preliminary research enabled the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the multilingual context of the research area vis-à-vis the mother tongue/local language (Angika) which was subsequently used as a cultural and linguistic resource for the development of other languages (Hindi and English). Assessment of learners' linguistic proficiency in Angika, Hindi and English and an analysis of their language textbooks facilitated the development of teaching-learning materials in Angika and English to help the development of grammatical concepts in the lower primary grades (II and III) and language progression in the upper primary grades (IV and V).

V. EXECUTION OF THE MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN CLASSROOMS

The preliminary research helped the researcher to identify the themes, the general and the specific language objectives and the grammatical and linguistic focus for grades II – V. English as a subject is introduced only from grade II in the government schools under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan in Kahalgaon hence, the learners of grade I are merely taught alphabets, numbers and a few words in English. For these learners, multilingual alphabet charts and an alphabet book using all the three languages - Angika, Hindi and English were developed. For the other grades, material development in the mother tongue of the learners – Angika was undertaken with the help of language experts, teachers, parents and the learners themselves.

Various genres such as prose, poetry, couplets, newspaper reports and articles, general knowledge facts and proverbs in Angika were explored for material production. Wherever possible authentic material in Angika was used but due to a paucity of children's literature available in the language, stories and poems in Hindi and/or English were translated in Angika by the experts. At times, the language experts themselves wrote prose, poetry or songs in Angika when a particular theme was given to them. These were then typed, suitable illustrations were added and the literature was printed and made available to the learners.

Learners' age, cognitive level, aptitude and interest were given due weightage in the selection, gradation and

presentation of language items, sounds, words and structures. Hindi was used as the language of instruction while Angika was used to teach a particular grammatical/linguistic concept in English, thus maintaining the true spirit of a multilingual classroom. The focus was on teaching English (L2) (target language) using the mother tongue of the learners (Angika) as a cultural and a linguistic resource where Hindi (L1) was used as a link language.

Since the focus in grades II and III is on the acquisition of basic grammatical concepts such as parts of speech and appreciating the qualities of rhyme and rhythm in poetry as detailed in the grammar progression table earlier, 10 units on grammar were developed for them. For transaction of the programme, 2 schools were selected where 10 units each on Angika and English in grades II and III were transacted over 10 periods for each grade respectively. First the learners were assessed on how well they knew or could acquire the grammatical concept in the unit on Angika given to them and then it was observed whether they were able to transfer their learning of this particular concept in their mother tongue to English. Finally, the grammar progression beginning from the first units which included simple tasks based on guided writing to the last units incorporating tasks requiring comprehension and controlled/free writing for these learners was documented.

Hence, after charting the grammar progression of the learners in the lower primary grades II and III, the researcher undertook language progression for grades IV and V to see whether Angika has a positive and complementary role to play in the transfer of concepts and themes from learners' mother tongue to English. The second part of the progression dealt with the English language progression in the upper primary grades IV and V. For Grades IV – V, 10 units for each class were developed in the learners' mother tongue - Angika and English containing an approximately equal number of poems and short stories. These themes were drawn from the Hindi and English textbook analysis undertaken for grades I – V earlier. The themes were based on the researcher's experience of living in the research area and the themes relevant to the immediate environment and the socio-cultural background of the learners such as patriotism, education, pollution, sports, festivals and so on which were explored for material development in Angika and English.

Approximately an equal number of prose and poetry units based on themes relevant to their age, aptitude, interest, cognitive level and cultural background were developed to see how well the learners could understand and discuss on a particular theme and transfer this understanding to English. Thus, their language progression in all the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing was documented. Grammar and vocabulary also constituted an integral part of this progression. For transaction of the programme, 2 schools were selected where 10 units each on Angika and English in grades IV and V were transacted over 20 periods for each grade respectively.

VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study highlighted the problem of non-comprehension for children in schools. Children have no comprehension of teacher's language even after about 6 months in Grade I. Grade I children showed no recognition of alphabets, except when arranged in sequence (showing that they could only "learn" by rote and memorisation). In other grades, the focus was on comprehension of texts and rote memorisation of poems and questions and answers given in the textbooks rather than the development of skills in languages. There are attitudes of shame and guilt associated with the mother tongue, as a majority of the children were not forthcoming in accepting the fact that they speak a 'different' language, such as, Angika/Bhojpuri/Maithili/Magadhi/Punjabi as their home language, which is not the standard language taught in schools. They regard their own languages as 'inferior', 'deficient', and consider the dominant languages of instruction in schools – Hindi and English as languages of empowerment, prestige and social mobility.

There was very little conversation or oral work when the medium of instruction was in the learners' L2, that is, English. Teaching emphasised passive participation, and copying alphabets and numbers from blackboards or text books. The teacher resorted to The Translation Method by teaching L2 through L1 (English through Hindi). The academic performance of children reflects the difficulties as they read with a lot of effort, mostly word by word. Their oral skills in the second language (English) were extremely poor. While they could comprehend a text in their L1 (Hindi), they were unable to formulate answers to simple questions in the standard language even in L1. In all the schools, the children performed poorly while reading in L2, whereas the situation was far better in L1.

In contrast, the learners were more fluent and comfortable speaking in their mother tongues—Angika/ Bhojpuri/ Maithili/ Magahi/ Punjabi. When their mother tongues were used for interaction, there was an initial hesitation among them in participating in classroom activities. But, when the teacher talk was in their language, there was an enthusiastic participation with a sense of pride and belongingness from them. They performed better in tasks and activities that were in their mother tongue compared to their L1 and L2 – Hindi and English.

The surveys and questionnaires revealed the fact that the teachers were most fluent in their mother tongue compared to their L1 and L2 and spoke to people from their own community in their mother tongue as they felt a sense of pride and cultural affiliation with 'their own' language. In the discussions and interviews with the teachers, they opined that children should be taught in their mother tongue, at least in the primary grades, to solve the problem of wastage and stagnation leading to children from disadvantaged groups being 'pushed out' of the education system. They expressed a keen desire to teach in the children's mother tongue if textbooks were made available and suggested that the curriculum should draw on the everyday life experiences of the learners. They firmly believed that the literature available in the children's mother tongue should be explored and they should be encouraged to bring their own life histories and

experiences as a rich cultural heritage and invaluable resource in the classrooms.

The study has given a lot of insight into the functional reality of a multilingual classroom where the indigenous mother tongue (Angika) as cultural capital of the learners complements the learning of English and both the languages do not cancel each other out but flourish in each other's company. Thus, within the limited duration of the study, the language progression across grades IV and V outlined the development in the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of the learners and an improvement in vocabulary and their literal and inferential understanding of texts in English as they moved from guided and controlled to free writing tasks. Their mother tongue Angika played a complementary role by enabling a positive transfer of knowledge and skills acquired to the target language English.

An effective use of children's mother tongues in the classroom does not simply mean using the interlingual translation; it implies that the whole language pedagogy is situated in multilinguality. Languages and cultures of children thus become powerful and invaluable resources for the acquisition of the target language. Poetry, drama, short story, novel and grammar have a translinguistic perspective. Hence, it is evident that although language planning in some form is required in all societies, the need for it is greater in a multilingual society where the problem of communication is complex, and challenges the speaker with a multitude of options.

When educators within a school develop language policies and organise their curriculum and instruction in such a way that the linguistic and cultural capital of children and communities is strongly affirmed in all the interactions of the school, then the school is rejecting the negative attitudes and ignorance about diversity that exist in the wider society. In challenging coercive relations of power, the school is holding up to bilingual children a positive and affirming mirror of who they are and who they can become within this society. Multilingual children have an enormous contribution to make to their societies, and to the international global community, if only we as educators put into practice what we believe is true for all children: children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it; every child has the right to have their talents recognised and promoted within the school.

In short, the cultural, linguistic and intellectual capital of our societies will increase dramatically when we stop seeing culturally and linguistically diverse children as "a problem to be solved" and instead open our eyes to the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources they bring from their homes to our schools and societies.

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