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Two Notes on Language Education in India

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Here we discuss in brief two topics relating to language education in India: education in the mother tongue and English in the school curriculum. The perspective of this article is that the subject under discussion is not merely of pedagogical significance, it is of ethical significance as well. We need an educational system which is genuinely sensitive to the aspirations of the socially and the educationally marginalized sections of our society; we need language policies that are realistic and implementable. For some years there has been demand, voiced mainly by some politicians, influential educationists and writers, for school education in the mother tongue till as late a stage as possible, at least Class V and some state governments are inclined to implement it. There has also been demand from the marginalized sections to introduce English in the school curriculum as early as possible. For many reasons, including this demand, many state governments have decided to introduce English at a very early stage: Class I or II. This is broadly the context for these notes. We suggest that the mother tongue education must not exclude children of any social group and also that some very careful thinking is needed to decide when English should be brought into the school curriculum for the maximum benefit of all learners, especially those from the marginalized sections.

EDUCATION IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

There is no denying that in principle the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education, including higher education. The problem is that because of constraints of circumstances, education through mother tongue has not always been possible. In such cases one suggests a policy of shift for a learner from instruction in his mother tongue to instruction in some other language - English in the case of India, for reasons of history. When UNESCO suggested that primary education must be in the medium of the mother tongue, surely it did so keeping in view the fact that there are a large number of languages in the world which cannot be the medium of instruction at even the upper primary level.

If a language is incapable of being used for education at all levels, it has to do with the social context in which that language has been used. It is well known that in a situation, where a widely used language co-exists with a language only locally used, a linguistic hierarchy comes to exist, which is undesirable but unavoidable. The former becomes more highly valued than the latter. This situation often leads to language shift and in some cases, language endangerment.
There is considerable pedagogical literature on the advantages – cognitive, psychological, etc. - of mother tongue education, especially in the early years. Ideas from this literature are often used to argue in favour of mother tongue education and persuade the parents to let their children be educated in their mother tongue. But the argument that would really persuade them must be in terms of economic advantages but this is an argument that obviously cannot come from language-learning research. This might roughly account for the present demand in India for introducing English in the curriculum as early as possible and also for the proliferation of private-funded “English medium” schools. They charge high fees and the quality of education in many of these certainly do not justify the same.

It is important to be aware that in the present context, unqualified support for mother tongue education in India amounts to supporting another kind of inequality. I am not suggesting that on this account mother tongue education should be resisted, but an awareness of this fact is needed so that meaningful affirmative action can be taken. India is a multilingual country where around two hundred languages and many dialects of those languages are spoken. Then there are languages which have less than ten thousand speakers and these are under the threat of extinction. Many languages have no script, so as of now they simply cannot be used as the language of instruction. Thus mother tongue education in our context becomes, in effect, education in the regional language or the main language of the state: Odia in Odisha, Telugu in Andhra Pradesh or Tamil in Tamil Nadu. There has been some research that suggests that a tribal child is quite handicapped in an educational system where “mother tongue” is only a misnomer for the regional language or the main language of the state. He is often an educational discard for reasons of language, not mental ability. For him, the three language formula becomes of necessity the four language formula, with the so-called mother tongue, but in reality the regional language, being the second language in pedagogical terms. But this observation conceals a lot. For instance, for an Odia speaker transition from Odia to a second/foreign language takes place quite late – at the higher secondary level, but for a tribal language speaker it takes place very early - when he is introduced to Odia as soon as he joins school. He is thus handicapped from the very start. One is perpetuating denial of opportunity to the poor and the disadvantaged if one is supporting mother tongue education in such a situation without a thought for those whose mother tongue is not the main language of the state. The best response to this situation is not rejecting the mother tongue education system, but making sincere and meaningful efforts to ensure that this opportunity is provided to all within a reasonable time frame.

For this to happen one of the things to be done is designing scripts for the many languages which have no script. There are tribal languages which are written in more than one script because the language users live in two or more states and for their language they use the script of the main language of that state. There is no issue if the same script is used by more than one language, but there indeed is, if the same language uses more than one script since language users of one state would have no access to the writing in their own language in another state. The best solution is for a particular language to have its own script, whether it is shared with another language or not. And the most satisfactory solution to the problem of choice of the script is the one which shows close phonemic-graphemic correspondence. There would be no problem of acceptance of a script by the users of the relevant language because at that stage there would not be any emotional connect with a particular script for them. Script seems to be a rather manageable issue in this context.
Another marginalized linguistic community is the one comprising migrant workers. To the best of my knowledge language and education planners have consistently ignored them. There are a considerable number of Odia migrant workers, for instance, in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Delhi etc. Their children have no opportunity of mother tongue education. Granted for the sake of argument that formal education system cannot take care of every situation and every section of language users, but this is not a situation where no affirmative steps can be taken in principle, at least to ensure that the children of the floating population of the unskilled working class are able to read basic materials such as newspapers in this language and write letters. It cannot be left to the parents entirely. Perhaps NGOs can be of help with support from the concerned government.

Many pedagogists and language activists in India these days are demanding education in the mother tongue, but unless the facility of mother tongue education is provided to all, it will be the basis for yet another divide in the Indian society, which we can call the "mother tongue divide".

ENGLISH IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

No one in India is unaware that English is the language of opportunity in today’s world; therefore there is demand from all sections of the society including and most importantly, the educationally and socially deprived ones, to introduce English early in the curriculum. No government can ignore it. In fact, many states now propose to start English in Class II or III.

In favour of introducing English early in the curriculum it is sometimes argued that there is support for it in modern language acquisition research: one’s language acquisition faculty remains active till the age of twelve or so. This obviously does not amount to saying that languages cannot be learnt later – only that there would be less contribution from nature. There is however a related finding, namely that without nurture, language acquisition would not be possible. And nurture in this context means exposure to language. Now, if one is exposed to ungrammatical English, one would learn ungrammatical English. In formulating our English language teaching policy we tend to miss the aspect of exposure.

The role of the teacher in foreign teaching cannot be overemphasized, especially at the school level because the teacher’s language is virtually the only exposure that the learners have, unlike at the higher levels where access to English lies outside the class room too for the student. One could therefore say that in India, English is the foreign language at the level of early stages of education and a second language at the higher school and college levels. Given this situation, even if the reading materials are good, they can be properly used only if the teacher is competent. The competence of the English teachers in our country at that level is poor - sometimes very poor - not excluding those in many of so-called "English medium schools", especially in the rural areas and small towns. Only a few schools in the big cities and metropolises have teachers of English whose command of the language is good but they are by and large untrained in second / foreign language teaching. Generally speaking, the English the school children are exposed to is ungrammatical and unacceptable. So the English they learn and use is very poor. Often it is as good as not
learning the language. In view of this, a reconsideration of the policy of introducing English so early is certainly in order.

In India, English is being marketed fairly aggressively by the non-governmental education sector. The English medium schools, managed by the private sector, charge heavy fees; still they are in great demand. It is not uncommon to see people who work in the big cities in the poorly paid, non-skilled, service-provider sector, spending a large part of their savings on their children's education in the English-medium schools hoping that English education would open doors of opportunity for their children and contribute to the enhancement of their own social status. All this can happen if they really learn the language, not an ungrammatical and unacceptable form of it.

In our educational system remedial English facility is available only at the college level and that too, often in theory, unless one has in mind our best institutes of technology, such as the IITs. In any case, remediation at the college stage is extremely difficult, which is unsurprising; not more than only a few benefit from even a successful remedial English programme. The biggest challenge that our country faces today in the field of education, to my mind, is providing quality English language education to the children of the socially and educationally deprived people.

In India there is no uniformity with respect to when English enters the curriculum in the government-funded regional language medium schools. These are the schools where children these days generally go when their parents are not in a position to afford their education in the English medium schools. In some states it is Class IV, in some, even earlier. In the English medium schools children learn English right from the beginning. Because of this, the parents who send their children to regional language medium schools have an apprehension that those who go to English medium schools would have better command of the language than their children and that their children would be at a disadvantage with respect to the children from English medium schools right from the beginning. On the face of their apprehension does not look unreasonable. Now whether it is reasonable or not is not the issue. This is a perception which is difficult to deal with by means of intellectual arguments.

In the present context there is no way this asymmetry can be eliminated. The government, whether Central or State, cannot intervene in the curriculum of the minority schools and the private schools (which often are misleadingly called “public schools”). The Central government can introduce a change in the curriculum in centrally funded schools alone, which are very few. This situation provides yet another reason for the demand to start English early in government schools. However, a reasonable English language teaching policy must take into consideration the important fact that the possibility of giving children sufficient, good quality exposure to English is very remote.

Concerning a somewhat different but related matter, in some English medium school systems in our country the teaching materials are culturally alien. The children learn about plants, trees, flowers and fruits, dresses and addresses, foods and delicacies, festivals, celebrations, nursery rhymes, folk tales and songs of an alien culture. They tend to develop taste for chocolates and pizzas rather than laddus and jilebis. A part of birthday celebration is blowing off of candles. On an auspicious occasion lighting diyas (clay and metal lamps) for example is part of ritual, not blowing off lights. All this appears to be innocent but it is
possible that some of the learners might not be able to connect well with their traditional cultural practices and grow up as a bit of an outsider in their own cultural surroundings and this might eventually lead to the lack of emotional maturity in some.

This is not to say that students should not be introduced to other cultures. On the contrary, they must be. Not just India, many countries, at least their metropolises, are multicultural. It is imperative that one develops understanding and respect for other cultures. All that one is suggesting here is that this could follow one’s acquaintance with, and some understanding of, one’s own culture as part of formal education. For this to happen there is need for appropriate teaching materials. It is not that steps have not been taken in this regard. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has indeed brought out text material keeping the cultural rootedness factor in view, but not all schools in our country use the NCERT text books. Besides, even in these books, certain regional cultures do not appear to have been adequately represented. But much more importantly, these texts cannot be imposed on those private schools which choose not to use these.

In today’s India, hostility to English is restricted to a section of the educated elite, who call this language “the killer language”. However, as is well known, most of them do not often send their children to the regional language schools and do not demand quality education in these schools. It is as though if learning English is aggressively discouraged, then the quality of education in these schools will improve automatically, which is an unintelligible proposition. It is the common people, the non-elite who want to learn English. They are aware that in today’s world, it is the language of knowledge and empowerment. The educational system must adequately respond to their aspiration.

Bibliography


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