

Mother tongue-based Multilingual Education in Bihar: A Practical Approach

Shilpy Raaj

shilpyraaj@gmail.com

PhD Scholar

Department of Education (CIE)

University of Delhi

33, Chhatra Marg

Delhi – 110007

Mother tongue-based Multilingual Education in Bihar: A Practical Approach

Abstract

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. Some studies in India have undertaken empirical research to prove this but not much has been done in the state of Bihar despite having a rich repertoire of languages and firm language policies in place. There is a need of weaving theory with practice so that the multilingual classrooms in Bihar 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. Issues such as these provided the rationale for writing this paper which aims at bridging the gap between the policies and their actual implementation in the classrooms by giving some recommendations at the end.

Keywords: mother-tongue based multilingual education, multilingual language proficiency, multilingual classrooms, linguistic minority, indigenous languages.

Introduction

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.

Multilingual Education

Multilingual education typically refers to "first-language-first" education that is, schooling which begins in the mother tongue and transitions to additional languages. Typically multilingual education programs are situated in developing countries where speakers of minority languages tend to be disadvantaged in the mainstream education system. Research shows that children whose early education is in the language of their home tend to do better in the later years of their education (Thomas and Collier, 1997). An essential difference between multilingual education programs and rural "mother tongue education" programs is the inclusion of a guided transition from learning through the mother tongue to learning through another tongue.

Related to the emphasis on a child's mother tongue is the implicit validation of her cultural or ethnic identity by taking languages which were previously considered "non-standard" and making active use of them in the classroom. Multilingual education in that sense underscores the importance of the child's worldview in shaping his or her learning. A widespread understanding of multilingual education programs (UNESCO, 2003, 2005) suggests that instruction should take place in the following stages:

1. Stage I - learning takes place entirely in the child's home language
2. Stage II - building fluency in the mother tongue. Introduction of oral second language - L2 (English).

3. Stage III - building oral fluency in the second language - L2 (English). Introduction of literacy in the second language - L2 (English).
4. Stage IV - using both the first language - L1 and the second language - L2 for lifelong learning.

Proponents of multilingual education stress that the second language acquisition component is seen as a "two-way" bridge, such that learners gain the ability to move back and forth between their mother tongue and the other tongue(s), rather than simply a transitional literacy program where reading through the mother tongue is abandoned at some stage in the education.

Based on the theories of multilingual education that are spelled out here, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa have adopted a thematic approach to multilingual education. Using a seasonal calendar within a relevant cultural context has provided a space to the tribal children of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh to rediscover their culture through their language. Multilingual education in this approach emphasizes first language first in the child taking the socio-cultural curriculum into classroom culture and then bridging to second language. In addition to the basic theory of Paulo Freire on critical pedagogy, Gramscian theory on education, Lev Vygotsky's scaffolding and Piaget's theory of cognition is applied in multilingual education. The unique thing in this approach is to involve the community in creating their own curriculum and minimising the theoretical hegemony, thereby creating a new set of people who believe in the ethics of generating and sharing knowledge for the society than limiting it to the theoreticians.

The key resource persons for Andhra and Orissa are the practitioners of multilingual education having substantial practical and theoretical knowledge on developing a community based curriculum within the community. Their approach is to empower the community, and involve the tribal teachers as the makers of their own knowledge system. While Andhra Pradesh has taken 8 tribal languages, Orissa has taken 11 tribal languages in this project. International multilingual consultants and practitioners such as Pamela Mackenzie, Steve Simpson and Vicky Simpson have taken three years to concretize the program in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Dr. D.P. Pattanayak, Dr. Khageswar Mahapatra and Dr. Ajit Mohanty were the state resource persons in Orissa while Dr. Ramesh and Dr. Upender Reddy were the state resource persons for Andhra Pradesh.

The Case of Bihar

The children of Bihar, apart from Hindi, are adept at a range of languages such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, Angika, Urdu and Bengali – each child simultaneously knowing two or more languages. The present curriculum fails to build upon this social capital, that is, the multilingual competence of children. The curriculum planners hardly realise that, as per latest research, the most efficient pedagogy even for learning English would be to draw upon this multilingual

richness that the children bring to the school. Nothing could be more alienating than the hiatus between the language of the home and the language of the school.

Bihar's children belong to a number of oral literature traditions that reflect a treasure of knowledge of history, geography, astronomy, natural resources, agriculture, forestry, meteorology, ornithology and, of course, medicine. None of this finds its due place in the school curriculum, not even in Environmental Studies which begin in Class III. Nor does the school permit the children to construct knowledge and bring all their varied sources of knowledge into curricular discourse in the school. Denial of this rich diversity among children amounts to denial of their inherent strengths, resulting in their alienation and ultimately their exclusion from schools.

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 a denial of their right to education by preventing access to education. Thus, in such a scenario, it becomes imperative that education caters to the social needs of every child to develop from mother tongue to multilingualism and provides equality of opportunity through a language-shelter type of multilingual education that begins in the mother-tongue medium and introduces other languages after at least three to five years of primary schooling.

Recommendations

Providing multilingual education is not a simple task. Education in the medium of a local language/mother tongue in the initial years is challenged by a host of problems, such as, the language may not have a script; the language may not even be generally recognised as constituting a legitimate language; there may be a shortage of educational materials in the language; there may be a lack of appropriately trained teachers and there may be resistance to schooling in the mother tongue by students, parents and teachers. The problem is further compounded if there are several mother tongues represented in one class. Nevertheless, it is now amply demonstrated that inclusion of indigenous and minority children hinges crucially on the language issue. With the Right to Education adding a dimension or immediacy to their inclusion, it is time that this issue is taken on rather than ignored due to the complexities involved. For this support will be needed from all quarters interested in a pluralistic social order that will ensure enhanced participation of the disadvantaged children.

In classrooms we observe a diversity of languages and language varieties. Education is about the development of competencies and language is a major tool for this purpose. However if we restrict ourselves to the standard language only as a medium of communication or only allow children to use the standard language to solve problems, to fulfil tasks in the classroom and not

make use of different communication modes, we miss all kinds of opportunities in the development of children's competencies. Hence, languages should be taught in an integrated manner, similar to the other subjects at the primary level to avoid the heavy curriculum load due to which the three language formula and the National Policy on Education (1968) could not be implemented.

The mother tongue of the learners' should be used as the medium of instruction in the primary grades. Their age, cognitive level, previous knowledge, aptitude and interests should be given due weightage in the selection, gradation and presentation of language items. The themes selected should be relevant to their immediate environment and their socio-cultural background. Communication should be the focus in lower grades where teacher talk in the learners' mother tongue assumes special importance if it is a mother tongue based language classroom. Instructions in a language class should be communicated with clarity using simple language. No two instructions or activities should be combined, especially in the lower grades. The role of examples is very important in language teaching.

Some general recommendations for inclusion of linguistic minority children are: teaching in the local languages by recruiting teachers who can speak these languages; development of educational material in local languages using resources available within the community; establishing regional/state resource centres in states for providing training, academic and other technical support for development of pedagogic tools and education materials catering to multilingual situations; training of teachers in multilingual education; sensitisation of teachers to indigenous cultures and practices; incorporation of local knowledge in the curriculum and textbooks; creating spaces for cultural mingling within schools so as to recognise indigenous cultures and practices and obliterate feelings of inferiority and alienation among disadvantaged children and the involvement of community members in school activities to reduce social distance between the school and the community.

The benefits of using an approach which is activity based will be far greater and challenging than the usual classes which focus on learning rules as the languages of the students will be used more creatively in the classroom and they will have enormous exposure to multiple languages at the same time. Moreover, the students will learn to make rules across languages in a stimulating environment which will help to sharpen their skills of observing, deducing and reasoning, thus leading to greater linguistic and cognitive flexibility. The level of participation and involvement will increase if the students are asked to contribute by sharing language data of their mother tongues which could, in effect, turn out to be better than any standardised textbook. These learning materials, based on students' experiences and communicative needs, would be far more dynamic. This would further boost their confidence and self-esteem as they get more space to participate and contribute. The final outcome may be a social change in which our students in their journey will discover that all languages are patterned, flexible and rule governed and that their own language is no less 'complex' or 'inferior' as compared to English.

Conclusion

An education system which does not take into account local culture and language is characterised by low intake, high repetition and high dropout rates. The dropout rates are high because education has little perceived relevance; achievement levels are low because concepts and competencies are difficult, or impossible to learn in an unfamiliar language. As many minority language communities live in remote and inaccessible regions, it is often the case that schooling in any form is unavailable. The “right to education” is in practice still denied to them. What they do have access to is usually only “non-indigenous” forms of education. Within these programmes tribal or indigenous culture may be misunderstood or ignored, or even depicted in negative terms. The language and culture of the classroom is unfamiliar; curriculum materials, classroom interaction and instruction are all in a foreign language and teaching methods are unrelated to cultural learning styles.

Schooling in a second language so limits children's progress in the acquisition of knowledge and skills that few are able to proceed to higher studies or find employment. These children are thus set up for rejection and its consequence is low self esteem, a system failure that translates into experienced personal failure. There is also a gender discrimination issue in that girls are more likely than boys to be monolingual and therefore more disadvantaged (Benson, UNESCO 2005). For those who do manage to complete high school it is difficult to fit back into their own culture and society; schooling can alienate the children from their communities. Further results of non-indigenous education include the loss of the heritage language and culture; loss of linguistic and cultural diversity and indigenous knowledge.

A case in point is the state of Bihar where the Bihari languages, the western group of Eastern Indic languages, Angika, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Magahi and Maithili are spoken in the neighboring states in India and in Nepal as well where they form more than 21% of the Nepalese population. Despite the large number of speakers of these languages, they have not been constitutionally recognised in India. These languages were legally absorbed under the subordinate label of HINDI in the 1961 Census. In Bihar, Hindi is the language used for educational and official matters. The first success for spreading Hindi occurred in Bihar in 1981, when Hindi displaced Urdu as the sole official language of the province. In this struggle between competing Hindi and Urdu, the potential claims of the three large mother tongues in the region – Magahi, Bhojpuri and Maithili were ignored. After independence Hindi was again given the sole official status through the Bihar Official Language Act, 1950. Such state and national politics are creating conditions for language endangerments.

References

- Dreze, Jean and Sen, Amartya (2002). *India: Development and Participation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garcia, Ofelia, Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove and Torres-Guzmán, Maria (eds). (2009). *Imagining Multilingual Schools: Languages in Education and Glocalization*. Clevedon, Buffalo and Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Lewis, M. Paul, Simons, Gary F. and Fennig, Charles D. (eds.) (2013). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Seventeenth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- Magga, Ole Henrik, Nicolaisen, Ida, Trask, Mililani, Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove and Dunbar, Robert (2005). *Indigenous Children's Education and Indigenous Languages*. Expert paper written for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. New York: United Nations.
- Malone, Susan (2005). Education in ethnic minority communities. Questions to consider, problems to solve. In UNESCO. *Promoting Literacy in Multilingual Situations*. Bangkok: UNESCO.
- Mohanty, Ajit K. and Misra, Girishwar (eds.) (2000). *Psychology of Poverty and Disadvantage*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Mohanty, Ajit K. (2008). 'Perpetuating Inequality: Language Disadvantage and Capability Deprivation of Tribal Mother Tongue Speakers in India.' In Wayne, Harbert (ed.). *Language and Poverty*. Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.
- Mohanty, Ajit K., Mishra, Mahendra Kumar, Reddy, N. Upender and Ramesh Gumidyala (2009). 'Overcoming the language barrier for tribal children: MLE in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, India'. In Mohanty, Ajit K., Panda Minati, Phillipson Robert and Skutnabb-Kangas Tove (eds.) *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Sen, Amartya (1985). *Commodities and capabilities*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
- Tomaševski, Katarina (2001). *Human rights obligations: making education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable*. Right to Education Primers 3. Lund: Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law and Stockholm, Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency).
- Tomaševski, Katarina (2004). *Economic, social and and cultural rights. The right to education. Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur Katarina Tomaševski*. Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Sixtieth session Item 10 on the provisional agenda. E/CN.4/2004/45. 26 December 2003.

UNESCO (2003a). *Language Vitality and Endangerment*. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. Approved 31 March 2003 by the Participants at International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages, UNESCO, Paris-Fontenoy, 10-12 March 2003. http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/file_download.php/1a41d53cf46e10710298d314450b97dfLanguage+Vitality.doc

UNESCO (2003c). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Education Position Paper. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf>

World Bank (2005). *In their Own Language: Education for All*. New York: World Bank.

Wurm, Stephen (1991). Language death and disappearance. Causes and circumstances. In R. Robins E Whelenbeck (eds.). *Endangered languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

