Multilingualism and English Language in Our Schools

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Abstract

Knowledge is power. Human history is not just a wonderful tale of war, conquest and glory. It is also a story of the evolution of knowledge, science, technology, engineering and their use for human development. Today, the land of Aryabhatta, Charaka, Ramanujama, Ramana and other has nothing that can remotely compare with Nalanda and Vikramashila universities in their heyday. It is time we should examine what has gone wrong in our quest to be the global centre for learning, knowledge and wisdom.

English Language, in modern digital global scenario, is one of the richest sources of improving, enhancing, expanding and empowering our knowledge. It has become a major link language at national and international levels and is a commonly used language in administration, offices, business, industry, internet, media, social media, etc. It plays a vital role in higher education, research for aesthetic aspects and employment too. Reference books necessary for carrying out higher education and research are available mostly in English language. Books from many other languages are translated into English language in order to enable non- native speakers benefit in their day-to-day life. So, teaching of English in schools has acquired an immense importance in the education system of our country.

Keywords: Multilingualism, English Language, Education Policy, Cognitive, Teaching, etc.

Introduction

India is a multilingual country with numerous languages and dialects. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are present in many parts of our country. We can not deny that we live in societies that are constantly drawing on and using multiple languages. Multilingualism represents a challenging issue for schooling contexts. It also refers to contexts where more than one language is used in or out-of-school setting. Research in second language acquisition has increasingly focused on multilingual contexts thus "acknowledging the Second Language Acquisition nowadays should be seen as the acquisition of multilingual and multicultural competencies even if the object of instruction is one standard linguistic system"[1].

English as a language has been in our country for more than a century. One can not disagree with the importance of the widespread desire for English in our country. It has occupied a place of prestige and honour in our societies. This desire, traditionally seen as antagonistic to the interests of indigenous languages and literatures, need not be so if we were to frame the debate differently (our post-colonial location offers such a possibility) and we should find out the new techniques and practices to combine English language learning with multilingualism.

English learner is entitled to English Language education. As a key learning area, English Language Education seeks to develop learners' English proficiency for study, work and leisure; provides them with opportunities for personal and intellectual development,   extend their

knowledge and experience of other cultures through the English medium, and help them overcome the challenges of the rapidly changing and keenly competitive knowledge-based society.

Education Policy

India's education policy discriminates against children from backward and economically backward class families. Government schools serving them are badly run and the medium of instruction is usually the regional language even when parents desire a transition to English.

A sound public education system is the best guarantee of equal opportunity for all. Successive governments have failed children and society on this front and tried to compensate through irrational reservation policies. This has opened up new fault lines in society as fresh caste agitations keep undermining social stability. Governments may finally be waking up to the problem by pushing back against nativism and emphasizing on learning outcomes. To illustrate, a new initiative which asked schools to devise a format to allow students to rate their classroom experience is a step in the right direction. Learning outcomes and teacher accountability should be the government's priority, not school's infrastructure which is a focal point in the Right to Education Act.

Our country's education policy needs radical reform. Instead of private institutions, government should focus on public schools which today languish for want of attention. If accountability is enforced and learning outcomes improved, it will directly benefit children from poor families and bring about a fairer society. Education is in crying need of big bang reforms which move away from hackneyed solutions of reservations and heavy handed state control.

Present Scenario: - Status of English in Primary Classes

There is a little bit improvement in the competency of class III students to read English whereas class V students' status remains the same. In the year 2009, 28.5% students of class III were able to read the general words of English language. In 2016, this figure has increased to 32%.

Last year, 24.5% students of class V could read general words of English language. After 2009, there has not been any significant change in this scene though marginal betterment was noted in class V students of the government schools of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhanda, Haryana, Maharashtra and Kerala. Improvement has also been noted in the private schools of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Assam, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Status of English in secondary classes

In the year 2009, 60.2% students of class VIII could read the simple sentences of English language. This figure was found declined in the surveys of the years 2014 and 2016.

In the year 2016, 60% students of any class who could read English were also able to understand the meaning of words. This competency has remained 62.47% in class V students. In comparison to 2014, there is not any significant change in this scene[2].

Modern Bihar has an inadequate educational infrastructure creating a huge mismatch between demand and supply. This problem is further compounded by increase in population. Also, English has been non - compulsory since 1967. The craving for higher education among the general population of Bihar has led to a migration of the student community from the state. This

has led to a 'flooding' of students to seek educational opportunities in other states such as New Delhi and Karnataka, even for graduation level college education. Researchers have found out that 37.8% of Bihar's government teachers are not found present during unannounced visit to school, the worst teacher absence rate in our country and one of the worst in the world.

English reading competency of 11.1 million students between 6 to 15 years of age from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and UP has remained below average. Total number of school children in our country is 25.2 million. If the education standard of these four states does not improve, in the year 2020, our country will be deprived of from 86.9 million possible working population.

Teaching Methods:

A. **Grammatical Approach -** The traditional grammar- translation method focuses on the translation of texts and the explicit teaching of grammatical structures. Especially since the 1960s, this method has fallen into disuse, as the direct method and the audio-lingual methods have been adopted. In the direct method, teachers model language patterns that students repeat without any translation. In the audio-lingual method, students practice patterns and dialogues to develop particular language structures. Although different, the grammar-translation, direct, and audio-lingual methods rely on a grammatical approach that is based on behaviourist theories of language learning.

B. **Communicative Approach -** In contrast, the communicative approach was derived from a constructivist theoretical framework that suggests that language learning occurs as students draw meaning form experiences and interpersonal interactions. This approach was developed in response to the failure of audio-lingual method and the increased need for communication across communities. Immersion methodology and integrated content-based methodology (ICB) are used frequently in bilingual education programmes to develop bilingualism, as well as in specialized English-only programmes for monolingualism. Teachers plan content and language objectives concurrently, and the additional language is used slowly and with simplification. Graphic organizers are used to scaffold instructions. Whereas the emphasis of immersion methodology is on the learning of content knowledge alongside second language development, the stress of ICB is more on the development of language and literacy in a second language.

C. **Cognitive Approach -** Moving away from the communicative approach, language learning started to be recognized as being as much cognitive as it is social and interactive. The emphasis of the cognitive approach is on learner's active control over the cognitive processes used in learning an additional language. This approach supports the transfer of knowledge stored as schemate or production systems in one language to the learning of new tasks in an additional language. Language is seen as a process that is an integral aspect of our thinking, meaning-making selves. Learning a language involves action movement, and the perception of affordances or relationships of possibility within different communicative events[3]. Whereas the communicative approach supports language learning through authentic communication, the cognitive approach involves explicit teaching and modelling of learning strategies and language.

D. Language Arrangements - One of the most accepted principles of language education for bilingualism is that the two languages must always be used in isolation, a remnant of the prevalence of the direct method. This is what Cummins (2007) refers to as "the two solitudes"[4]. In most language education programmes, whether foreign language, second language, heritage language, the philosophy has been that the students' home language practices can never be used, and that the teacher should exclusively use the additional language. Even in bilingual education programmes, the two languages are most often allocated strictly according to different teachers, different subjects, different times of day, or different places. However, in practice, most language education programmes use language flexibly. Sometimes this flexibility is random and is used to draw students towards the dominant language. However, if used strategically, the flexible multilingual use of different language practices has an important purpose in language education.

Other Suggestions

The globalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s seemed to signal the need for a globalized workforce. Academic and ideologue, Kancha Illaih notes that since the backward class people of India "had no entry to the colonial English world", the new move to teach English in all government schools becomes a welcome one. He disagrees with the upper caste contention that "English will destroy the culture of the soil". Logically speaking, he says, "the next step would be the abolition of the gap between the prevalent English medium schools and the government schools in terms of both teaching and infrastructure"[5].

The most important question is that how can we fulfil the widespread demand of English learning? Could this perhaps be done by the introduction of new variants of English, say of the "basic kind" that the English critic I.A. Richards had spoken of? Additionally, it should be considered that in the given scenario, we must have a national policy for English language learning with matching resources and increased institutional support.

"Indian English" has come of age, and has been accepted as a legitimate category the world over. Consequently, we must develop our own expertise suitable to our own conditions. English language and literature must be brought into the fold of the literatures and habitat of post-colonial India. It is here that the teachers of English must address their task in an innovative and professional manner.

As far as the question of English and multilingualism is concerned, we must develop new paradigms and tools for the teaching of English in our country. Instead of an approach that upholds a cordon sanitaire between English and Indian languages, English teaching must not be "context neutral". To be effective, "it has to take into account factors like learner's position, textual implication, assumptions like teaching methodology, etc."[6] This could also be furthered by "critical bilingualism" i.e. "the ability to not just speak two languages but to be conscious of the socio-cultural, political and ideological contexts in which the language operates"[7].

Conclusion

Multilingualism and English language in our schools will remain a challenge because most educational systems are organized by nation states, which continue to exert their power and influence by manipulating language in ways that benefit them exclusively. If fruitful bilingual and multilingual education programmes are to be developed, education systems must turn from

reflecting the interests of the nation state to sustaining learners, notably children, who, through their dynamic language practices, have to make sense of their increasingly multilingual world.

Our vision of the global English of "the brave new world" should focus to indigenise and localise the teaching of English language and literature even as we aspire to play our legitimate role in the global turf. English language learning in our country should be made compulsory and go hand-in-hand with multilingualism. By such actions, we will be sensitive to plurality in the classroom situation and relate to the varied language/caste/class backgrounds the students come from. This must be as true of our cultural politics as of English teaching in the classroom.

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