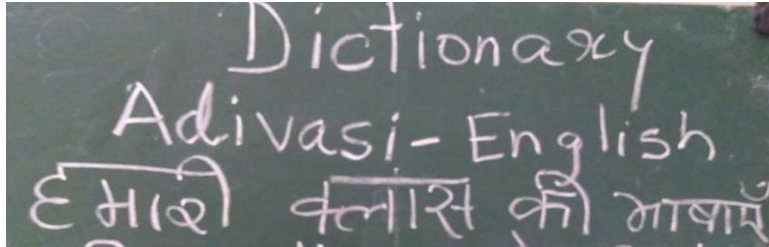


## Creating Spaces for the Child's Language within Classrooms

### Languages in India



**Example 1:** One day, Rashi and her class started the process of creating a class dictionary. Rashi was in the middle of her year long tenure as a teacher at an Adivasi school in rural Madhya Pradesh. Steadfast in its resolve to uphold the Adivasi language and culture, the school had an environment which was nurturing and receptive towards the children's language, Bareli. The dictionary, that Rashi's class was creating, contained the names of frequently visible objects around the children in English (the language of socioeconomic aspiration), Hindi (the language of state) and Bareli (the home language of children). Rashi began labeling three columns on the blackboard as "English", "Hindi" and "Bare..." by which time a child stopped her with a suggestion.

Child (C): दीदी, बरेली नहीं आदिवासी लिखो | (Didi, don't write "Bareli", write "Adivasi")

Rashi (R): मगर, अभी हम भाषा का नाम लिख रहे हैं ना | जैसे हिंदी, इंग्लिश, वैसे ही बरेली | (But we are writing the names of the languages right now. Like English, Hindi and similarly, Bareli)

C: लेकिन ये सिर्फ बरेली डिक्शनरी थोड़ी है, ये आदिवासी डिक्शनरी है | (But this is not only a Bareli dictionary, it's an Adivasi dictionary)

R: हाँ, आदिवासी शब्द है, मगर भाषा का नाम तो बरेली है ना | (Yes. These are words from the Adivasi culture. But the language name is still Bareli, right?)

The child went quiet, hesitant to go on but clearly unconvinced. Rashi prodded gently, in order to understand what bothered him.

C: पर मैं तो भिलाला हूँ न। (But, I am a Bhilala)...

The conversation went on for a while before Rashi realized that there existed at least four different Adivasi languages amongst the small group of 12 students she taught, Bareli, Palya, Nimadi and Bhilala. A detail, which to her utter surprise and guilt, she had missed in the last six months, assuming that Bareli was the only Adivasi language present.

Language	Count
Palya	1
Hindi	2
English	1
Bareli	10
Nimadi	3
Bhilala	2

Add a dash of Marathi, Gujarati, English and Hindi to these four languages, and one can get a sense of the tremendous linguistic diversity in this small classroom situated in a remote Adivasi village. Consider the scope of linguistic diversity in the close to eight-and-a-half lakh government primary schools functioning across the length and breadth of India's cities, towns and villages!

**Note: A total of 1652 Mother Tongues have been officially recognized by the 2001 Census data. Amongst these, languages which were deemed similar under various parameters have been brought under the umbrella of one language. Following this process, these 1652 languages have been grouped into a total of 122 languages. Out of these 122 languages, only 26 languages find their way into our school as Medium of Instruction. (Jhingran, 2009).**

Thus, even from the broadly categorized set of 122 Indian languages, 96 of these languages are still officially excluded from the school. None of the Mother Tongues from Rashi's classroom finds its way into the standard school curriculum. This diversity leads to a wide range of language situations within classrooms. Some of these situations are represented in the table below.

### Examples of Diversity of Language Situations within Classrooms

- a. Multiple languages in a classroom, one Medium of Instruction, common link language present. Teacher and students comprehend each other through a common, link language. (For e.g., an English Medium classroom in Madhya Pradesh. Teachers and students understand each other through use of Hindi).
- b. Multiple languages in a classroom, one Medium of Instruction, common link language not present for all. Teacher and some students comprehend each other through common, link language; but, certain groups of students in the classroom cannot access this link language. (For example, in the above anecdote, some Bhilala students cannot access Hindi).
- c. Single home language in the classroom; but this is not the Medium of Instruction (e.g., children from a Lambani speaking settlement in a government school in Karnataka). Teacher understands children's language, and uses a combination of home language and school language to teach.
- d. Single home language in the classroom that is not the Medium of Instruction (e.g., children from a Lambani speaking settlement in a government school in Karnataka). But, in this situation, the teacher does not understand the children's language, and does not use it to communicate with the children.
- e. Home language which is the “same” as school language; however, the children speak a different regional variety of the language than the version taught in school. (e.g., children speaking “Telangana-Telugu” in a school that used “Andhra-Telugu” in undivided Andhra Pradesh. Teacher assumes that children understand school variety, but they don't).
- f. Most children in class share the school language; however a group of students don't speak the dominant state language. (For e.g., Bihari migrant children in a Marathi medium school).

**Note: 25% of primary school children face moderate to severe problems in the initial months of primary school on account of their home language being different from the school language. (Jhingran, 2009)**

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How many Mother Tongues exist in the classroom/setting that you teach/work in?
2. When you were a student, was the medium of instruction in your school the same as or different from your Mother Tongue? Did this impact you? How?

**The Child's Language in the Classroom**

Let's imagine that the conversation described at the beginning of this handout happened differently. What if Rashi hadn't encouraged the child to tell her what was bothering him? What if the child wasn't encouraged to reveal, what to him, was an important part of his identity? Surely, the class would have continued with the creation of the Hindi-English-Bareli dictionary. Meanwhile, what would the children speaking Nimadi, Palya and Bhilala be feeling? Would they feel included within the class? Would they be able to express their thoughts? Would they be motivated to participate within classroom interactions?

The teacher and children in this example were still able to speak and understand one common language--Hindi. What about other situations where the teacher and students share no common link language? What are the different kinds of difficulties faced by children in classes where they don't understand what's going on because the language of instruction is very different from their own home languages? Here, we consider two kinds of difficulties created by not including children's languages in the classroom—the impact on their learning; and the impact on their socio-emotional well-being.

**1. Child's Language and her Learning**

Let us consider the following two examples

***Example 2:** In a Grade 1 classroom, Mohika's class sits in a semi-circle. The children speak a common language which is different from the Medium of instruction. Mohika understands the children's language. Each child is involved in drawing their experience of going to a Mela (fair). After giving them some time and space to draw, Mohika goes to each child and asks them what they have drawn. The conversation happens in the child's home language. The teacher writes the child's narration down under the drawing in the child's own language, and reads it back to the child. (Since the child's home language does not have a script, the teacher*

*writes down the child's words in the script of the regional language.) Later, Mohika also rewrites the same story in the school language and shares it with the child.*

The primary objective of this exercise is to encourage the child to express freely her experience in a language that she is comfortable with. Once she has expressed it, a teacher shows an interest in hearing her experience. The child speaks uninhibitedly in her mother tongue, as the teacher writes it down on paper. The child sees her language valued and written down by the teacher, and sees that what she has said can be read back to her. She also understands that the same thoughts can be expressed in a different language.



**Example 3:** *The teacher enters a Grade 3 classroom. She asks the children to take out their notebooks and pens. She writes the date and day in one corner of the blackboard, asks the children to note it down. She then briefly goes to the children, asking them to raise their notebooks to see whether they have written what they have been asked to. Sunil, a child who has recently joined the school and is still unfamiliar with the school language, is sitting with his notebook, which is still closed. As the teacher reaches him, and asks him to show his notebook, he uncertainly complies, looking around and following the other children's actions. The teacher asks him where the page is where he has started work. Sunil looks at her and then at the other students, still uncertain. The teacher goes to the board, and points to the place where the date and day are written. Sunil asks in his home language, with genuineness, "Is this to be written?" The teacher nods. Sunil quickly copies down the day and date, and walks to the teacher with his notebook.*

Here, the child's understanding of a very basic instruction is hindered due to his unfamiliarity with the language of instruction. Understanding the teacher and the textbook is absolutely crucial for learning to happen. In the absence of this, children's learning suffers terribly, often leading to their silencing and lack of participation in class. While this example showed a child's difficulties with a simple instruction, this lack of comprehension extends also to all other aspects of schoolwork. Research abounds with evidence that children learn best when taught in a language that they can comprehend well.

The examples given here describe differences in classrooms where the child is not able to understand what is being said in the classroom, versus where the child is able to freely express herself and participate fully. These factors significantly impact how relevant children (especially first generation learners) find schooling, and how well they fare in thinking, problem-solving and other higher order skills.

**Note: The world's biggest study tracked the performance of 210 000 students in the United States over eight years. The study found that the longer students learnt in the MT, the better their academic performance was. This included how well they learnt their second language (English) as well. (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010, p.96).**

## **2. Exclusion of Child's Identity, Culture and Experiences**

When children's languages are excluded from the classroom, it is not only their learning that suffers. They also suffer socio-emotionally in several ways. They notice and learn that their language is not valued in the classroom. Since language not just a means of communication, but also a marker of culture and identity, the child might conclude that her culture is also not valued in the classroom. When cultures and languages are not included in schools, the experience and knowledge of those communities also get left out. Who are the groups whose experiences, knowledge and languages are most likely to be excluded? These are the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups of society, usually, including tribals, migrants and other vulnerable groups.





***Example 4:** During a lesson called “The Tree” in Grade 6, the English teacher in a tribal school finished explaining the chapter, before moving on to the exercises at the back. These exercises consisted of “Match the Following”, “Fill in the Blanks”, “Question-Answers”, etc. The students struggled through the exercises, but continued diligently. Suddenly, the teacher thought of asking the children about the trees in their environment using their own language. The children burst into excited conversation, naming many trees they knew of. They readily agreed to make a list of the trees around them, naming them in their own language and the medium of instruction. What followed was a list of at least fifty trees, classified according to their usage, such as trees with medicinal properties, trees which give fruits, trees which provide timber, etc. The teacher later gave the children the English names for the trees. The lesson was transformed from a dull exercise for all, into a learning exercise.*

This knowledge was a only a small component of the children’s repertoire of knowledge, which included a high degree of skill in farming, cattle rearing, various crafts, cooking, child care, etc. Most of this knowledge never finds its way into the classroom, both due to the language barrier, as well as the barrier of a perception that sees certain communities as inferior.

Another form of discrimination that a child often faces is due to the notion that one language variety is superior or “purer” than the other. Children’s languages are “corrected” by well-

meaning teachers, who substitute the child's vocabulary and grammar with those of the standard language. Some examples are given here.



**Example 5:** *Two class 8th students are involved in a friendly banter. A young teacher sits close by, involved in some work. Both children seem quite comfortable with the teacher's presence, occasionally even involving her in their banter, seeking refuge or validation.*

*On one such occasion, one of them laughingly says*

*S1: दीदी एकदम गांडा है ये (Didi, he is absolutely @!@! (a word that sounds like a swear word to the teacher) The teacher looked up startled hearing a word which is close to an oft used expletive in the Hindi Belt of the country, instantly invoking guilt in the child*

*T: और दो गालियाँ जो भी देना है (disdainfully). (Sure, go ahead, use more expletives/gaalis)*

*The child who has uttered the word looks down. Surprisingly, the other child comes to his rescue.*

*S2: दीदी ये गाली नहीं है हमारे भाषा मे बोलते है। इसका मतलब बेवकूफ है (Didi this is not a gaali. We use this in our language. It means "foolish".) The children's willingness to make the teacher understand this difference is touching. They are aware of the connotation of this word in other towns and cities, but at the same time they are accustomed to its local usage.*



**Example 6:** *In many Indian languages, respect, status and familiarity are communicated through the use of “honorifics” for referring to people. Thus, in Hindi, there are three levels of respect or familiarity, for example, in the usage of “tu”, “tum” and “aap” A teacher would be referred to by the “aap” honorific in standard Hindi. However, teaching in a community where the local language doesn’t feature such explicit markers, a young teacher often found children greeting her with -*

*C: दीदी, तू वारली छे की? (Didi, are you fine?) The marker for “you” is not the one used in standard Hindi for a teacher.*

*As the children grew older, they adopted the codes of the more dominant language. Often when a younger child said,*

*C: दीदी तू काय कर री है? (Didi, what are you doing?)...An older child hearing the conversation would assertively say, “आप! Ó, requesting to the younger child to switch to a more appropriate speech code suitable for conversing with teachers.*

Both these examples denote differences in language use due to different speech patterns. Often, these differences get interpreted as deficits, where entire communities, cultures and languages get touted as inferior or inappropriate by schools. For example, in the LiRIL study (Menon et al., 2017), teachers often referred to children’s languages as “impure”, “wrong” and so on, while their own standard language was seen as more “pure”.

Children from marginalized communities such as Adivasis, Dalits, and migrant children often face intense discrimination within schools due to different patterns of language use. For example, a Bihari migrant in a Kannada medium school will face exclusion due to her language as well as her culture. Similarly tribals are often marginalized for their language and traditions, often referred to by different derogatory names such as *Narbhakshi* (man-eater), *Aadhawasi* (semi-civilized) owing to vastly misrepresentative stereotypes.

The multiplicity of these scenarios, and the lack of understanding needed to support children and teachers in these classrooms leads to issues of exclusion, discrimination and severe language

learning difficulties. Who are the children who are most frequently and most severely facing language based exclusion? This table provides a few categories.

### **Groups most Vulnerable to Language-Based Exclusion in Classrooms in India**

- a. Speakers of minor languages.
- b. Speakers of tribal languages
- c. Speakers of major languages who become linguistic minorities through migration or dislocation
- d. Speakers of religious minority languages, such as, Urdu

(adapted from Sridhar, 1996)

As educators, it is essential that we remain sensitive to diversity and create supportive environments for it to develop within our classrooms. It is also important that we constantly and consciously battle stereotypes, not letting it affect our judgments of the child.

**Note: Of the tribal children who join school, 50% never reach grade 5 and only 20% survive the years of schooling to take the high school examination, which only about 8% actually pass. The truth is that many of these students were not “drop-outs”, but “push-outs” in an unresponsive system that systematically devalues them - their culture, their languages and their identities (Mohanty, 2009).**

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. In what ways does discrimination towards her language and culture affect a child?
2. How have your schooling experiences as a child affected your perception of your own Mother Tongue?

## How Can We Include Children's Languages within Classrooms?

In the previous sections, we have considered the nature of linguistic diversity in the country as well as the reasons why it should be encouraged and nurtured within schools. In this section, we briefly consider ways by which we can actually go about including multiple languages in our classrooms. In this section we present a few suggestions that can be followed by teachers in different contexts to create space for children's languages in the classroom. Not all contexts in our country permit teachers to include children's languages equally. We can think of at least three possible scenarios:

1. If the teacher is not able to change the Medium of Instruction of the classroom she is working in, she could try to create and protect some spaces where children can be permitted and encouraged to use their Mother Tongues.
2. In an environment that grants more flexibility and freedom to the teacher, the intent could be to use Mother Tongue meaningfully as a Medium of Instruction in the primary grades, eventually transitioning the child to the standard language.
3. In an environment where the teacher or the organization she is working for has complete flexibility, they could go beyond merely using the Mother Tongue to transition children to the standard language. They could maintain the child's language as the medium of instruction through the elementary grades, and nurture and cultivate this language with active collaborations with the community. The standard language (and English) could also be introduced simultaneously.

The suggestions provided below can be employed for any of the three situations mentioned above. However, the extent of their usage will depend on the context the teacher finds herself in.

1. **Creating a Language Profile of Children.** All teachers should maintain a socio-linguistic profile of children in their classrooms. This profile should contain information about the child's home language, languages in the child's environment, languages that the child is familiar with, and so on. This suggestion can be used for all three situations described above.
2. **Socio-Cultural Profile of Children.** All teachers should also maintain a profile consisting of information about the child's community, tribe, migration pattern, economic background, literacy levels of family members, print presence in the home, and so on. This kind of a profile

is an extremely valuable asset in understanding children and sensitizing the teacher to their needs and specific cultural habits. Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP), Ajmer, an organization committed to socially sensitive literacy practices, undertakes a detailed mapping of the children's socio-cultural backgrounds at the beginning of the year and continuously updates changes.

3. **Multilingual Class Environment.** An environment should be created that welcomes children's home languages into the classroom. The classroom space can be prepared to display multilingual charts, labels, poems, story books, word corners, and so on; and should include opportunities for children to use multiple languages in speaking, listening, reading and writing.
4. **School-Community Collaborations.** A language doesn't exist in isolation but is embedded within the culture, history and traditions of the community. Collaborating with the community in various early language and literacy activities creates a strong community ownership of the school.

Example 1: The "MLE-Plus" program that works with tribal languages and populations in Orissa has engaged in a range of activities, such as undertaking ethnographic studies of the area, organizing storytelling fairs, mathematics expeditions, creating and printing of books on local history and folklores, and conducting sports events and picnic.

Example 2: OELP Ajmer, regularly hosts a "Kahani Mela" organized by the local communities involving a ranges of vibrant activities involving the children and community in literary activities. Local histories, geographies and folklore are explored with the community's support. Books are shared and read aloud. Village stories are narrated by elders and documented by children. Groups of children engage in creation of newspapers, puppets, personal stalls, and so on.

5. **Peer Support.** It is unreasonable to expect that a teacher should always be proficient in the child's language, though it is reasonable to expect that the teacher remain sensitive to it and shows an inclination towards learning it. In cases of a genuine absence of means of a common language between the teacher and the students, the teacher could seek help from other students who understand the child's language. For example, in one school observed in north eastern Karnataka, a teacher took help from an older Lambani speaking child in communicating with a younger Lambani speaking child who had just entered first-grade. Both the older and the

younger child were helped by this interaction; as was the teacher. The teacher could also seek help from different colleagues, or from members of the local community.

6. **Create Simple Multilingual TLM.** Simple TLMs, such as multilingual charts, flash cards for words and sounds, simple dictionaries, small books illustrated by children can be created. Existing stories and poems can also be adapted to the local culture and language.

**Example:** OELP's adaptation of the rhyme 'Old Macdonald' to 'Budhe Ramu Kaka.'

### Discussion Questions:

1. What are some other ideas you can think of for creating space for children's home languages in the classroom?
2. Until what age should children's home languages be accommodated in the classroom?

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