

Mother Tongue or English as Medium of Instruction in Preschools?
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Shailaja Menon, Tata Institute of Social Sciences-Hyderabad

A few months ago, a Deccan Chronicle article (Nov 21, 2017) reported on the conclusions being reached by the Tamil Nadu Curriculum Framework Committee. It read:

“Even as the craze for English medium has reached new levels among the parents, the curriculum committee is mulling to make mother tongue as medium of instruction at least till primary level.

In its preamble to the draft syllabus, it was stated that the curriculum of Tamil Nadu spelling out the education policy laid emphasis on the two language formula, the mother tongue, and English while giving importance to learning through mother tongue.

“In our pursuit of English medium education, we have rendered our children incompetent in both the languages. The worldwide researches show that children naturally understand the concepts better when we teach them in their mother tongue. We have to give education only in their mother tongue”, a committee member said.

While welcoming the government's decision to give importance for learning through mother tongue, P.B. Prince Gajendrababu, general secretary, State Platform for Common School System said, “Learning in mother tongue will encourage the children to develop critical thinking and creative knowledge. So far all the education committees have recommended the medium of instruction to be in mother tongue and the RTE act also states that the medium instruction should be in mother tongue as far as practicable”.

In contrast, a year-and-a-half earlier (Feb 21, 2016), the “Legally India.com” website carried an article by advocate K.V. Dhananjay. He compared the value of Mother Tongue (MT) which is seen as desirable as a medium of instruction by scholars and politicians, vis-à-vis the growing preference for English medium instruction in school education across India. Mahatma Gandhi was one of the greatest proponents of ‘mother tongue’ as a compulsory medium of instruction during primary education. Mahatma Gandhi was terribly wrong, according to Mr. Dhananjay! India, he said, had more than two thousand languages at the beginning of the 20th century when Gandhi proposed MT based education. Nobody asked Mahatma Gandhi how the Government could have provided 2000 media of instruction at all. If only anybody would have asked him, he would not have had any answer then!

And so, the public debate continues, and clearly, there are valid points on both sides that need to be considered carefully.

So, let us pause and do that. Let us try to understand, in the brief period of time given to this talk, what the key issues involved in this debate are. But, before that, it is important to clarify what a “mother tongue” is. A mother tongue is what is presumed to be the child’s “first” language – the language of greatest proficiency and comfort. It may or may not be the regional language of the state. In Karnataka alone, there are an estimated 72 languages. Other than the better known Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Urdu, Marathi, Kodava, Konkani, Lambani and so on, it has an

estimated 50 tribal languages, some of which have only a few hundred speakers each. So, the discussion today is about Mother Tongue vs. English, not regional language vs. English.

If I were to grossly oversimplify the argument, it would look like this. On the one hand are what may be broadly termed as the cognitive/academic/socio-emotional and rights-based arguments – concerning the learning and wellbeing of the child. On the other, are the socio-economic and logistical arguments, concerning the opportunities available to the child and the practicality of offering MT based education.

If we were to make our decision about MT vs. English solely on the basis of cognitive and socio-emotional considerations, it is very clear what our decision would be. More than 150-200 studies conducted across the world – from North America, to Europe, to Africa and Asia--over the last 40-50 years, have shown that children who are taught in bilingual programmes, with their MT as the medium of instruction, consistently performed better than their peers who studied in non-MT medium of instruction. Further, the longer they stayed in a MT-medium of instruction – what are called the “late-exit” programmes – the better their retention and performance in school. (When we speak of “late-exit”, we are talking of approximately Grade 8).

Why would that be the case? This is because when children come to preschools and elementary schools, they bring with them a fairly developed and developing repertoire of oral language. Now, language is not just a means of communication. It is also one of the key means by which people think, make sense of their environments etc. So, these young children come into preschool/early school contexts with concepts, with ideas, with thoughts – all of which are transacted in their own language, their MT. But, often, the language they encounter in the school is quite alien and incomprehensible to them. This would apply to standard dialects of the regional language, also. For example, a child who goes to an aanganwadi in north east Karnataka might hear a very different dialect of Kannada in school, than the one spoken at home. This creates a gap in the child’s potential learning – because, the young child who is developing into a competent language user in their own language, is suddenly made to feel incompetent, powerless and helpless in the classroom. In the five year longitudinal study that my colleagues and I conducted in Yadgir district of Karnataka, we noted many, many such instances of confusion in first grade classrooms, where teachers and the curriculum were not accepting the children’s home vocabularies, and spent a lot of time drilling them on new words to substitute the child’s own – time that could have been used, instead, for learning and developing new concepts in the home language.

This kind of a situation creates both cognitive as well as socio-emotional consequences for the young child – impacting their learning, for sure, but also their sense of identity, self-esteem, and most importantly, their motivation to persist in schools. This has profound consequences, especially for first generation learners in our country. Professor Ajit Mohanty, who has worked extensively with tribal language education in Odisha, has referred to this as the “push-out” phenomenon, where children are “pushed-out” of school by an insensitive and unresponsive education system, rather than their “dropping out” of schools, as it is commonly understood (Mohanty, 2009).

If this situation impacted only a small percentage of children in our country, perhaps it would be tolerable. But, consider that the 2001 Census recorded 1652 MTs in India, which were then

“rationalised” into 122 languages, of which, currently, only 26 are offered as Media of Instruction in India. Dr. Dhir Jhingran (2009) has estimated that 1 out of every 4 children in the country experiences moderate to severe learning difficulties because of the mismatch between the language that the child is proficient in and the medium of instruction in the school.

Consider another aspect of the same argument. Not only is it well established that children face cognitive/academic/socio-emotional disadvantages when learning in a medium other than the MT, but, multiple sources of evidence also suggest that bilingual children actually enjoy cognitive advantages over their monolingual peers. Bilingual children who have received primary instruction in their MT have a deeper awareness of how languages work, display greater flexibility of thinking and achieve stronger academic outcomes (Cummins, 2001).

There is yet another angle to this argument. Languages are often linked to communities’ sense of identities and also serve as knowledge repositories of the community. It is well established that when children are schooled through a second language (in this case, English), this results in either a loss of, or a lack of continued development in the child’s primary language, or MT. When entire communities move to the second language, the first language eventually dies out, especially if it has few speakers. When languages die out because there are no speakers left, it is not just the words that go, but also the ideas, the thoughts, the knowledge systems that were represented in that language. Professor Skutnabb-Kangas, who has worked extensively with indigenous languages across the world, and also in India, has shown the link between linguistic diversity and ecological diversity (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson & Harmon, 2018).. When tribal languages die out, entire bodies of experience and expertise with managing local ecological systems are wiped out. In addition, a community’s sense of identity and culture suffer. Again, we should pause to understand the extent of the problem. It is estimated that India has lost about 225-250 languages in the last 50 years, and currently has 197 endangered languages. The rate of linguistic extinction in our country is one of the highest in the world.

Now, let’s consider the other side of the argument for a bit. What has created the motivation that sustains the tremendous aspiration for English in our country?

Undoubtedly a large part of the reason is related to the socio-economic possibilities that are opened up by having access to the world of English. It is also related to issues of identity and power. The elites of our country are English-speaking. Many people, and groups of people, who have historically been denied access to this group aspire to belong. Most universities and institutions of higher education in India conduct their courses in English, making access to this language quite important. It also serves as an important link language within our country, and also globally.

Therefore, people who do not have access to this language of global power – power in terms of economic opportunities, educational opportunities and identity – really do suffer in real terms. Dalit activists have rightly pointed out that we have a highly unfair system in India at present – where we have “English for the classes and MT for the masses”. The burden of preserving language, culture and identity is often placed on the shoulders of the masses, even as the elites have migrated into another world of cultural possibilities. Even the very academics and policy makers who argue for MT-medium of education, send their own children to English-medium

schools. This is a fact in our country today. All our theories, discussions and debates about the right medium of instruction, seems to be about how best to educate “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1988).

It should be noted that the “other people” whose children’s educational futures we decide on committees and at conferences, have decided opinions about what they would like for their own children. And, many of them would like English. In 2014, the Supreme Court ruled against the imposition of MT in Karnataka primary schools, arguing that it is the parents and not the government that should decide the medium of instruction for children. Of course, the Karnataka government was not pursuing MT medium education, as much as regional language education, the aims of which are to maintain Kannada language, culture and identity, and resisting the dominance of English.

So, we arrive at what seems to be an impasse. In an article that I co-wrote in 2014 with Vanamala Viswanatha and Jane Sahi, we noted that:

All these debates in the Indian context point to an essential ambivalence towards English—as a colonial and neocolonial oppressive presence to be resisted, while simultaneously serving as a liberatory force for social and economic reasons. Lodge (1997, as cited in Janks, 1998) refers to this situation as the ‘access paradox’. The paradox is that if you provide access to the dominant language, you entrench its dominance; if, on the other hand, you deny students access to the language of power, you entrench their marginalisation (Janks, 1998).

So, which is it to be?

There is a path available, but the implementation of it requires vision, commitment and a great deal of patient effort at building up systemic and individual capacities.

Can a multilingual society such as India, not imagine strong and viable bilingual/multilingual programmes in the early years of schooling? Jim Cummins, in his various writings, has elaborated on the idea of “additive bilingualism, which is a process by which students develop both fluency and proficiency in a second language while continuing to develop proficiency in their first. The process involves adding a second language, not replacing the first language with the second language (which is known as subtractive bilingualism).

The idea of multilingualism in schools has been discussed and conceived of for a long time in policy-making circles. Its best known articulation (Kothari Commission Report, 1964) had surprisingly poor implementation, and therefore, a bad reputation in educational circles – the “three-language” formula that required every Indian to learn a minimum of three languages during their school years. Let us not return to that conceptualisation then.

Instead, let us rely on what we know today about language learning in the early years. We know for sure that:

- The human brain is wired for multilingualism. There are more multilingual people on this planet (and in this room!) than monolinguals.
- Despite the three language policy, multilingualism, or even bilingualism, has never been implemented seriously in our classrooms. In a truly bilingual programme, different languages would not be taught separately as distinct subjects but would be integrated in the daily life and work of the classroom.

- This is especially easy to imagine in preschool settings, where one could imagine setting up spaces that move between the MT, the regional language and English.
- In such a set-up, it is important that the MT be used when new concepts are being introduced, or when there is any discussion (so that students can contribute comfortably). It should also be used for giving instruction, building relationships etc. At the same time, English, or any second language, could be introduced through multilingual labeling of the classroom, through bilingual texts that can be read aloud, or with the aim of basic conversational proficiency in the early years. Students could also be encouraged to express thoughts that they have already expressed in their MT in English.
- Where more than one MT exists in the classroom, there are constitutional provisions for providing MT based instruction if 10 out of 40 students speak the same language. In more diverse linguistic contexts, even if the media of instruction move between the regional language and English, the curriculum and pedagogy could make spaces and provisions for welcoming and including the different languages in the classroom.

In conclusion, to my mind, it is clear that MT based education has significant cognitive, academic and socio-emotional advantages, especially during the early years. However, this does not mean that we shut the door to English in our preschool classrooms. As the noted bilingual educator, Nancy Hornberger, has stated, “The findings that a stronger first language leads to a stronger second language do not necessarily imply that the first language must be fully developed before the second language is introduced. *Rather the first language must not be abandoned before it is fully developed*, whether the second language is introduced simultaneously or successively, early or late, in that process’ (1989, p. 287, cited in Cummins, 2000, p. 23, emphasis mine).

It is worth considering that we stand to lose nothing by encouraging multilingualism in our classrooms, but stand to gain much. The government system, large and cumbersome as it is, will take time to understand any new idea, to shift gears and to change. But, private preschools, such as those that are represented for the large part in this room, can adapt and change far more easily. It might be in our collective intent to welcome multilingualism into our preschool classrooms that the larger system might find hope and the examples that it is looking for.

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