

English for All: Is it Desirable? Is it Possible?

*Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed,
well considered and yet fervent public conviction
that the most deadly of all possible sins
is the mutilation of a child's spirit. . . .*

Erik Erikson, Young Man Luther

Please bear with me if I start by giving some personal history. I am an American by birth. I first came to India in 1961. I stayed in Hyderabad for two years, teaching English as a lecturer in Vivek Vardhini College , and staying in the home of the principal, Dr. S.D. Satwalekar. Since the family was Maharashtrian I became interested in Marathi. From 1963-1966 I went to the University of Pennsylvania to do course work in linguistics, and also studied Marathi and some Telugu. In 1966 I went to Phaltan, a taluka town in Western Maharashtra, to do field work for my Ph.D. dissertation on social variation in Marathi speech. By 1972 I knew that I wanted to settle in Phaltan, and do something creative in the field of education. I applied for Indian citizenship, but received no reply. Meanwhile, along with finishing my dissertation, I was working with Jai Nimbkar to produce materials to teach Marathi to adult non-Maharashtrian learners. Every other year I would go to the U.S. to teach a short course in Marathi to American undergraduates preparing to spend two terms in Pune under the Associated Colleges of the Midwest India Studies Programme.

The year 1978 was a turning point. In April of that year I rounded up a number of out-of-school Dalit children and started trying to teach them to read and write. In December I was finally granted Indian citizenship. About the same time the Phaltan Municipality fixed up an old dharmashala and let us use it for our literacy class. Although I had originally thought of the work as a temporary, non-formal undertaking, it took shape as Apli Shala ('Our School'), a programme involving enrolling children in municipal schools, and providing additional tuition in reading, writing and arithmetic. We also provided books, school supplies, and, when necessary, health care for children and their

parents. In 1984 we formally started the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS): Progressive Education Society, and Apli Shala became a unit of the PSS.

By this time many people were urging me to start a full-time English medium school. For a long time I refused, saying that we already had our hands full. Finally, however, I realized that it is not only the children from the Dalit community that need a good education; all children do – from Dalit to Elite. Finally I decided to start a full-time Marathi medium school – the Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB) – with students drawn from all sections of the community. Though the medium of instruction would be Marathi, we would also teach Hindi and English. As I am a linguist with a special interest in literacy, I developed a method of teaching beginning reading and writing in Marathi, which we successfully used not only in KNB but also in Zilla Parishad schools in Phaltan taluka.

In 2012, after working in KNB for 30 years, I came to Hyderabad to join the new branch of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences which was being established in Hyderabad. In coming to TISS, one of my hopes was to adapt for Telugu the method of teaching reading that we had developed in Maharashtra. In January of this year, with the financial support of the Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) we were able to start this project.

After some months of preparatory work – getting permissions, etc. – we started surveying the government schools we had been asked to visit. Our aim was to work in Telugu medium schools, but, to our surprise, some of these schools had shifted to English medium in Class I, and the remainder were shifting to English medium for Class I in June (this year). In all these schools the majority of the children had little exposure to English, and in most cases the teachers apparently did not know any English. After some juggling, we have ended up with five schools – three of the original lot, and two new ones. All except one are ‘English medium’ in Class I.

How do we explain this situation, and how do we deal with it? On one level, the explanation is obvious: not only in Hyderabad, but in cities and towns all over India, poor parents are vying to send their children to English medium schools. We cannot deny that the desire of these parents to send their children to English medium schools has a rational basis. The parents are well aware that thousands of middle and upper middle class Indians are going abroad for their higher education – especially to the U.S., U.K., and Australia. The disadvantaged know that these already privileged people will consolidate their privileged position by completing their degrees and either securing highly-paid jobs abroad, or coming back to India to take up well-paying jobs. Whether parents aspire to send their children abroad to study in a university or work in a multinational corporation, or to work in a BPO, a travel service, or shopping mall, to drive a taxi or an auto rickshaw, they feel that a knowledge of English is essential. And

they are not wrong. But they also feel that unless a child studies in English medium, she/he cannot learn English.

Those from lower income families, are, as far as possible, are opting for private, low-fee English medium schools. This trend threatens the very existence of the government-run schools, and the government in some states is making English the medium of instruction in its own schools. This may be politically necessary, but is it possible for our governments to run its schools in English medium, and turn out students who have a grasp of the language? Even if it is possible, is it desirable?

One cannot help asking oneself these questions the moment one steps inside a first grade classroom in a government school on the first day of the new school year, and hears fifty children yelling “A for Apple, B for Bat”, etc. The incredible thing, as my friend Jane Sahi has observed, is that even with this method some children manage to learn some English. It is a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit, and our amazing cognitive endowment. But such apparent initial success does not carry children very far in becoming literate in English. The 2016 ASER report for English shows that nationwide only about one-third of the Class 3 children tested could read simple words, though they had been studying it since Class 1. (However, it must be emphasized that the learning outcomes for the regional languages are also far from satisfactory, Over recent years the ASER reports have repeatedly shown that all over the country more than half of the Class 3 children in government schools could not read the Class 1 regional language text.)

Altogether, it is clear that most government schools anywhere in India are not in a position to become English medium schools overnight. Continuing the present policy of changing the label of a school without changing the reality will eventually have disastrous consequences – both for individual students and for the system. State governments all over the country are wrestling with the question: “Experts say that children should learn first in their mother tongue, but if poor parents understandably demand English medium, what are we supposed to do?”

Is there any alternative to instant English medium schools? Is there a way forward? I very hesitantly, tentatively suggest that there may be. But before we look at this, let us look more closely at the question of medium of instruction, and the devaluation of the mother tongue/first language.

The devaluation of the mother tongue

In the title of this talk I have used the phrase ‘English for All.’ To most people, I suppose, the phrase implies English as the medium of instruction. The idea generates a seductive excitement among parents, children and teachers (even those who do not know English, and will have to ‘teach through English.’) Parents and teachers dream of their

children learning English, and competing with well-to-do children attending English medium schools. Even children from marginalised backgrounds, given the choice of singing *Illu, illu, illu* ('House, House, House') and 'Johnny, Johnny, Yes, Papa? Eating Sugar? No, Papa,' will opt for the latter. Why? Is it that somehow singing that silly song makes them feel as if they have joined a new and beautiful world? Similarly, when asked for the Telugu words for 'mother' and 'father,' children often reply, "Mummy" and "Daddy." (Then for the remaining relatives they shift to Telugu !)

The sad thing is that today education through the mother tongue has become devalued. Saying that one studied in a government regional language medium school is a matter of shame, a confession that one belongs to the disadvantaged. This was not always the case, and in most countries it is not the case even today.

What is the argument for education through the mother tongue/first language? The mother tongue/first language is an inestimable gift that life gives to each of us. It is through experience encoded in the mother tongue that a child builds up a picture of the world in his/her head. The memory of the home and family, the land and weather, the food, songs, stories, festivals, daily rituals – both secular and religious –, games, weddings, funerals, and early social interactions, occupations, technologies, arts and crafts provides the foundation for all the child's perception, thinking, and learning. The extension of understanding from the known to the unknown enables learning to proceed in an easy flow. If a child is inordinately excited by 'Johnny, Johnny,' is it because she/he has never been encouraged to look at her/his experience as valuable and worth sharing?

To reiterate: learning through one's mother tongue makes learning easier and more transparent. The knowledge of the world the child has acquired is instantly on hand, to facilitate developing advanced levels of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

From the standpoint of society, a common medium of instruction provides a basis for social communication – although it does not guarantee that such communication will happen. Moreover, one of the functions of a shared common language is that it enables a society to stay in touch with its cultural history. I am not talking only about literature, but about things like traditional cropping patterns (like intercropping grain with pulses) that regenerated the soil, or techniques of storing and transporting rain water.

A shared common language also gives a society an opportunity to look critically at its social history. The burgeoning of Dalit literature in Maharashtra several decades ago made it possible for large numbers of caste Hindus to get some idea of the Dalit experience. There is still much denial, too much blaming the victim, but it is undeniable that Dalit literature has had an impact.

Some praise for English

No matter how much we sing the praises of the mother tongue/first language, we cannot deny that for the time being, at least, English is the language of power at both the global level and the local level. It is also the premier language of knowledge creation. Quite aside from the innumerable practical advantages offered by English, it offers a refreshingly diverse view of human experience. I have heard people from various countries talk about feeling claustrophobic when confined only to the discourse in their mother tongue. Although it is an accident of history that English has made such inroads into this country, it would be folly not to take advantage of it. The problem is making English available to all, without sacrificing the advantages of the mother tongue.

A middle position: Cummins' bilingual model

What I would like to argue is that there is a middle position that is desirable –and maybe even possible – although it would require tremendous political will, and commitment at all levels.

The position that I would argue for is a bilingual model of education. It is based on the theoretical insights of James Cummins, a Canadian linguist. Cummins developed his model in the context of Canada, which has much less linguistic diversity than India. Moreover, as I understand it, his model is typically used in situations where non-English speaking individuals migrate to an English-speaking country. Thus, lack of exposure to English is not a problem. In the case of India, on the other hand, a large population speaking one or more Indian languages is aspiring to gain a high level of proficiency in English. These differences notwithstanding, I believe that Cummins offers insights that can offer us a way forward.

First of all, Cummins distinguishes between two kinds of linguistic proficiency: BICS and CALP. BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) refers to skills required for everyday social interaction. CALP, on the other hand, is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. This distinction sheds light on a phenomenon that has puzzled many of us teaching in Indian universities, where we sometimes find students who speak and write English fluently, but are unable to understand or write an academic paper.

Cummins has another insight that is very relevant for our purposes. This is what he calls CUP— Common Underlying Proficiency. He argues that as a child learns a first language, he/she acquires certain basic metalinguistic skills which are utilized to make subsequent language learning easier.

The concepts referred to above (i.e., BICS, CALP, and CUP) underpin Cummins' model of bilingual education, where two languages are given equal prestige.

A bilingual model

In essence, the model I am suggesting is very close to the three-language formula originally proposed by the Education Commission in 1968, and again recommended by NCF-2005. The difference is that the aim will be to develop schools in which the mother tongue/first language and English are given equal weight by Class 8. This means that in the first three years the emphasis will be on children's becoming literate in the mother tongue/first language. The major part of each day will be devoted to instruction in the mother tongue. During this three-year period spoken English will be taught, through songs, poems, art activities, stories, etc. If possible, beginning reading and writing in English will be introduced in the Class 3. In later years the time given to English will increase, and certain subjects (most probably, maths and science) will be taught primarily in English. (This is similar to the practice which is termed 'semi-English' in Maharashtra.) Ideally, some subjects (such as literature or social studies) could be theme-based, and taught in a genuine bilingual fashion.

Implementing the model: problems and potential

Of course, it is easy to write a paragraph describing an ideal scenario. But implementing it is a task of an entirely different magnitude. It will take tremendous political will, committed leadership, a visionary pedagogy, a huge financial investment and massive development of human resources.

Political will. The slogan of English medium elicits an immediate response. A bilingual medium school does not sound quite as exciting. It will require a building of awareness in the communities whose children attend government schools. These days the school year starts with *Badi Bata* ('Path to School') campaigns to urge parents to enroll their children in government schools. The teachers literally go out in the streets and shout slogans. Drumming up support for the idea of a bilingual medium school will require a quieter, more sustained approach. Not only teachers, but political leaders have to find creative ways to conduct a dialogue with parents on the need for a school that does justice to both the mother tongue and English.

In doing this we must be careful not to take the line that the poor must take the responsibility to save the mother tongue. This is sometimes said, and the poor rightly answer: why should we take the burden of saving the mother tongue when the rich are sending their children to elite English medium schools? The point that has to be made is that children gain more when given a solid bilingual education.

Children's lack of exposure to English. Cummins' model assumes that the children learning English will be a small minority in a community where the majority of the population speak English as their first language. In government schools in India cities this is not the case. The children frequently come from migrant families who come to the cities to work as labourers. The families do not know English; sometimes the language they speak is a tribal language, or the language of a neighbouring state. Strikingly, though, those who not know the local language when they come to the city learn to speak it fluently in three or four years. They pick it up naturally as they are immersed in it, and they require it for their survival. This is not the case with English, although I would not be surprised to learn that they know quite a number of English words. An interesting possibility is that these bi- or multi-lingual children might learn English faster than their monolingual peers.

Teachers' lack of knowledge of English. Initially my staff and I had the impression that very few teachers in the schools we had chosen knew any English. Gradually we are finding that they know more than we thought – maybe even more than they thought. Some are enthusiastic about learning English, and are creatively finding ways to engage children in language learning activities. For instance, a teacher (who is bilingual in Telugu and Hindi) wanted to help the children learn the names of various colours. She deliberately wore a dress with many colours, and the class had great fun identifying them.

Of course, there is a great distance between doing this and teaching concepts in science, mathematics or social science in English. Cummins' model assumes that each teacher will be bilingual. However, it may be more realistic to have one teacher for the regional language and another for English.

In any case, major training efforts will need to be launched. However, we need to avoid a lock-step programme. It is important to encourage various groups to create and share training methods and materials. Undoubtedly, Internet-based material in the form of videos can be used to upgrade teachers' knowledge of language and content. On the early primary level, forming WhatsApp groups interacting through smart phones can facilitate teachers' sharing of songs, stories, and poems.

Need for school libraries. If we are serious about improving our schools there needs to be a massive investment in school libraries. Unless we give children access to books and TLM in the two or three languages of the school, all talk of educational reform will be meaningless.

A final word

I have proposed a bilingual model of education for our government schools, The model attempts to give equal weight to the mother tongue/first language and English from Class 8 to 10. The aim is that students will have a mastery of both languages on the levels of speaking proficiency and cognitive academic proficiency.

This is one model. There may be others. The important thing is that we commit ourselves to develop our government schools so that they can equip the students with a robust mastery of speaking and academic skills in both the home language and English. If we are content with merely changing the labels on the schools, the parents and children will finally realize that their trust has been betrayed, and their children are not able to hold their own either in their home language or English. If this happens, the schools will eventually die, and in the process, the spirit of countless children will be broken, We would do well to keep in mind the warning of Erik Erikson which is given as an epigraph at the beginning of this paper: “. . .the deadliest of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.”

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