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# Anurag Behar: CBSE's first-language approach to teaching is spot on

Anurag Behar 4 min read 11 Jun 2025, 12:30 PM IST

Gaining literacy in a familiar language is more efficient; English can then be learnt afterwards.

SUMMARY

**Criticism aimed at the board's directive on using the mother tongue of children for early education is misguided. In a linguistically diverse country where English is alien to most, it's the ideal language for our classrooms.**

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a directive on 22 May. A few newspaper editorials and opinion pieces criticized this directive, but these were profoundly misleading.

Since the criticism was levelled at the **CBSE directive** to introduce teaching in the mother tongue of students in primary classes, let's first examine what the notice actually says.

It states that the first **language of literacy**—denoted as R1 or the language in which the child first learns to read and write—should be the child's mother tongue. If that is

impractical due to the presence of children with different mother tongues in the same classroom, the children's next most familiar language—often the most widely used local language—should be used. In short, children should learn to read and write first in a language they already know.

The CBSE circular further clarifies that R1 should naturally serve as the medium of instruction for other subjects, including literacy in a second language (R2). It adds that once a child gains literacy in both R1 and R2, either language could be used for teaching other subjects.

Even those misguidedly criticizing the directive acknowledge what global research, experience and common sense affirm: Children learn to read and write far more effectively in a language they already know. This way, teachers leverage their existing linguistic and social knowledge, making it easy for students to connect known words with written symbols. Conversely, teaching literacy in an unfamiliar language compounds the difficulty, as children must simultaneously learn a new language and develop the capacity of reading and writing.

The directive's critics conceded this fundamental principle, but their analysis still went wrong. Why? The error lies in making assertions such as the following: application of the same logic uniformly across our multilingual education system creates complexities; this makes it hard to choose the language of teaching in classrooms in cities and towns where students from different linguistic backgrounds are present.

Such arguments suggest that criticism was aimed at the directive without full comprehension of it—or that it was driven by outrage at the idea of English being displaced.

The CBSE directive addresses the complexities of multilingual environments rather than introducing them. Its logic leads to locally appropriate language choices for R1, which resolves—but does not create—multilingual challenges. On the other hand, the logic implicit in the arguments of critics is perverse: it advocates the uniform imposition of English in multilingual settings, which is a deeply flawed and dysfunctional approach because English is the most unfamiliar language for the vast majority of children in any of India's multilingual settings.

In looking at this issue, one must not conjure up the image of one's own children or grandchildren—who likely represent 2% of the country. For 98%, English is alien, particularly in early childhood.

A simple example illustrates this. Consider a Class 1 classroom in Mangalore, where the mother tongues of students may include Kannada, Malayalam, Urdu, Tulu and Konkani. Since these children live in Mangalore, most would have reasonable familiarity with Kannada, regardless of their mother tongue. It's highly unlikely any would know English. Thus, Kannada would be the most effective R1: for some, it would be their mother tongue; for others, a familiar language. English, by contrast, would be unfamiliar to all.

This scenario repeats across India. Even in large metropolitan cities with migrants from other states, children are far more likely to know the local language than English. The CBSE directive, therefore, is the most educationally sound approach to literacy in the context of our multilingual reality.It is aimed at addressing one of our deepest systemic issues: how to enable the achievement of literacy, the foundation

of all learning and subsequent education. The use of a familiar language alone is insufficient to tackle this task but is central and necessary.
We need not reiterate the scale of India's literacy crisis or the urgency of addressing it—for improving education and making it more equitable and inclusive. The vice-like grip English holds on our elite imagination manifests in editorials and opinion pieces that seem reflexive, with inadequate thought devoted to them on technical matters of education.
There is a good reason that we do not see such misguided takes on, say, hospital cardiac care protocols. It's too technical for shallow lay analysis. Yet, in education, even the most technical issues are dissected loosely.

No doubt, English remains socially and economically aspirational. So, many want every Indian child to learn the language. But critics fail to recognize that the CBSE's approach will be far more effective for both literacy and teaching English.
Gaining literacy in a familiar language is more efficient; English can then be learnt afterwards. This is vastly different from forcing literacy in an unfamiliar English. The approach advocated by the directive's critics would not only make literacy goals difficult to achieve, but make learning English even more so. Visit so-called English-medium schools and you'll see children struggling with reading, writing and English itself.
We should laud the CBSE for its educationally correct and brave approach, not condemn it.

*The author is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.*