

Using Multilinguality as a Classroom Resource

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Understanding Language

Can we think of ourselves as being human if we did not have language? What would we have been without it? What kind of a society would we have been? How would we share our thoughts with each other? Would we be able to think? Would we be able to reflect on what we were doing and what was happening around us, and record it? Would it be possible for us to go into the past and discover our histories? Would it be possible for us to plan our future? Would we be able to do so many new experiments and researches? The list of questions is endless. It is obvious that without language none of these things would be possible. Language is a vital attribute of being human.

For a long time, language was seen just as a tool for communication. It is now clear, however, that this is a very narrow understanding of language. Language has a much wider application; apart from communication, language also enables human beings to think, imagine, feel, analyze, and is a powerful medium of constructing knowledge.

Generally, language is taken to mean English or Hindi, or a specific language. However, no one speaks only one specific language or only a single fixed variety. In the context of India, almost every Indian uses many languages and their varieties. Thus apart from cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, we also have language diversity. In fact there are so many languages that it is not possible for one to understand all of them. But multilinguality does not imply that one

has to learn all the languages; what it means is that one has to respect all languages and their speakers.

It is indeed surprising to note that languages have more similarities than differences. For example, all languages have vowel and consonantal sounds (of course the number may vary). Also, most of the words will follow alteration of these sounds. The sentences will generally have a subject, an object and a verb (the order may vary).

The central idea of this paper is to discuss how multilinguality can be used as a resource in the classroom. I will first discuss the language situation in India with the help of some concrete examples. I will then try to explain why we need to promote multilinguality, and how it can be used as a resource in the classroom. Lastly, I will explore how the similarities and differences in languages can be exploited in the classroom to make learning more interesting and meaningful.

Multilingualism in India

I reproduce below observations from three different situations:

Observation 1

I observed class 1 in an Udaipur primary school. It had twenty-five children. Most of the children were quite fluent in Hindi and Mewari (language spoken in Udaipur, Rajasthan, and nearby areas). They also spoke a few words of English. Some of the children could speak Vagari and Marwari. In conversations with me (or any other teacher), they would talk in Hindi, but when talking with

their friends, while doing group work, while playing or during lunch, they would talk in their local language (s).

Observation 2

This is an observation of an office in Raipur, Chhattisgarh. There were approximately fifty cleaning staff employed at the office. Most of them spoke at least three to four languages. During an informal conversation with them, I learnt that not only did they speak Chhattisgari and its other varieties, but they also spoke Hindi and some English. Most of the people belonging to this group had never been to school but they spoke all the languages quite fluently.

Observation 3

I have recently shifted to Assam where I am living in a very small village. The majority of the adult population here has never been to school. However, almost all of them speak at least two-three languages. These include Mundari, Kisani, Asami, Nepali, Bengali and some Hindi.

These observations give us an idea of the linguistic diversity in our country. They also substantiate the fact that India is a multilingual country and that knowing/speaking at least two to three languages is a common phenomenon across the country—whether it is Rajasthan in the west, or Chhattisgarh or Assam in the east.

The observations elucidate that: 1) learning more than one language is not a difficult task (provided there are many languages in the environment) and 2) each one of us has the potential to learn more than one language.

Why then does language learning become so difficult in school?

Appreciating Classroom Multilinguality

Many people acquire several languages as children, yet language learning seems to be a very difficult task in schools. What makes

children fear a new language when it is introduced? Despite having the potential for learning several languages, why do children get disinterested in learning the new language being taught formally at school? Why do they often not want to share the fact that they already know so many languages? This makes us think about the multilingual classroom.

By multilinguality we mean that not only do people possess the ability to speak different languages, but they also have the freedom to speak their own languages. Also, people are not laughed at, or seen as inferior because they come from a certain language background. If this can be achieved, then classroom multilinguality is here to stay. However, how this is to be achieved is not very clear as multilinguality is considered as a barrier to learning ‘the one language’ with all its ‘purity’. We need to break these stereotypes that not only become hurdles in achieving democratic values, but also hamper the learning processes of children.

Building upon what children already know, and relating the school knowledge with their daily experiences has a positive impact on children’s learning. A three to four-year-old child knows not only the rules of his/her language, but also when to speak, whom to speak with and how. By treating a class as monolingual, the teacher neither appreciates the language potential of the children, nor makes use of the linguistic capability each child has. Instead language is treated as another subject where the emphasis is on finishing the syllabus. The primary objective of language teaching, however, is to make children feel secure, to help them share their experiences, to draw a connection between the home and school language, to listen to each other, to question and thus develop an interest in language learning. This objective will be achieved if the classroom interaction respects all languages, and the educational programme and

the teacher make an effort to understand and use the languages of children and their community. Several studies have repeatedly shown that multilinguality correlates highly significantly with language proficiency, scholastic achievement, cognitive flexibility, and social tolerance.

The concept of spirality between various subjects is well known. A multilingual classroom makes it possible for children to see the similarities and differences between various languages. While analyzing languages, children learn various skills such as collecting, observing and analyzing data, and reaching conclusions, which are important for any subjects be it, Science, Mathematics or History.

A good classroom is one where children are respected for what they are and where they are engaged. We all are aware that language is constitutive of human being; without it, it is difficult to think of ourselves and our society. Respecting children's language means respecting children, giving their language space in the class is essential for giving them space. "Children will learn only in an atmosphere where they feel they are valued. ... Our children need to feel that each one of them, their homes, communities, languages and cultures, are valuable" (NCF 2005, pp. 14). A multilingual classroom is the only viable way forward.

Engagement with the children is possible when the children understand the task, feel that it is challenging according to their level, can make some meaning out of it and thus see the purpose of doing it. Often, children get stuck because they cannot understand the task as it is in a different language. They are not able to understand most of the things that go on in the classroom and gradually get disconnected. This in turn demotivates children and destroys their self-confidence and the space for learning from the peer group. They gradually lose their confidence, self-esteem and interest in studies.

In the Classroom

What should be taught, how it should be taught, what kind of textbooks should be used, what should the role of the teacher and the children be—all these questions are connected with the kind of education we want, which is ultimately linked to the kind of society we want. In the following section, we will see how multilinguality can prove to be a useful resource in the classroom. We will also learn how multilinguality allows us to attain some of the objectives of language teaching, and thus of overall education.

Some Activities

For these activities, the teacher may evolve her own methodology. The following guidelines may help:

1. Do not make children feel that some languages are better than others.
2. Allow them to speak the language they are comfortable with.
3. Do not pressurize them to speak the standard language.
4. Allow them to talk about their family, experiences with their friends, toys or whatever they like.

Imagine a class (classes 1 and 2) where two-three languages are represented. The teacher does not speak the language/s of the children. How can she start? It is quite a challenging situation for the teacher; either she can take help from other teachers or older children.

Children may be asked to draw things they like the most. The teacher may ask them to name the things that they have drawn. They may also be asked to name animals, means of transport, and names of the things that they see in the classroom. While children list the names, the teacher can write them down, either on the board, or in her notebook (not for the children but for herself so that the next time she knows

some of the words from the children's language repertoire).

Music has no boundaries. Therefore, music can be used initially by *just singing poems*. This may be accompanied by the matching actions, or the poem may be sung without any action. This will give both the teacher as well as the students the exposure to sounds as well as words of new languages along with the rhythm.

By exploring and appreciating what children know and by trying to understand them, the teacher will encourage the children to take part in the classroom processes. Giving space to their language will heighten their self-esteem and also make them more confident. However, the teacher will have to have patience as this is a time-intensive task as many times children do not speak at all.

Simultaneously, the teacher may also introduce some script, letters, words or sentences. Children should be given the freedom to use the standard script (it may be Devnagari, Bangla, Assamese, etc.) to write their language. Once the children become familiar with the various languages in the classroom and develop confidence in the teacher that she will not stop them from using any language in any way that they want, more challenging tasks can be given to them. The children may for example be asked to do an oral translation of small sentences, stories, or poems; or be asked to find words from different languages which have the same meaning.

In higher classes (5, 6, and 7) children may be given more complex projects such as:

1. Conduct a survey and find out which languages people speak in your village/community/*mohalla*). Children may be divided into groups of five and given some ideas for the survey—number of days (20-30), number of families they need to interact with (at least 20-30 from different locations of the village/*mohalla*). The survey may

also be conducted across different socio-economic categories (teacher needs to explain this). Making a language profile will also involve some mathematical skills such as making a table, comparing the percentage, etc.

2. Another activity for children could be to translate stories/poems from textbooks. These stories would not be from their own textbooks but from those of the junior classes. Again, this activity may be conducted in groups. After translating two to three stories, the children may be asked to share them with the younger children. This interaction will not only give children the confidence that they can help others to learn, but it will also develop a sense of responsibility and sensitivity towards younger children. The collection of stories can also be translated in various languages.

These activities must simply be taken as suggestions. How these will unfold in the classroom will depend on the teacher and children, and the overall context of the classroom. If there are fifty to sixty children in a class (which is true in our context), and they represent four-five different languages, then doing these activities becomes really challenging.

References

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