

Multilingualism and Bilingualism for Language Teachers

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Introduction

A language teacher, if not all teachers, can work successfully with two or even more languages. In many CBSE schools including the Kendriya Vidyalayas, English is the medium of education, therefore, it seems only pedagogically desirable and psychologically advantageous for both the students and the teachers to work with English as well as the other languages being taught in the school or represented among the children. Unless a teacher treats the languages of the children as a resource, she may not be able to understand their output, and may not be pedagogically very effective.

Why should we do it?

Children in class one have a good knowledge of their mother tongue. Also, in each classroom there is an average of 4-6 language groups, depending upon the State. Let me explain—in

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the States, we may find some children who speak the regional language of that State as well as some other languages, such as Tamil and some other languages in Tamil Nadu; Bangla as well as some other languages in West Bengal, and Marathi and some other languages in Maharashtra. The second group may belong to the neighbouring States—a Marathi group in

places adjoining Maharashtra such as Napanagar or Burhanpur of Madhya Pradesh, or an Oriya Group in Chhattisgarh, or a Hindi Group in Punjab along with Punjabi and Haryanavi.

In such situations a language teacher can do really well if he/she knows some basics of the language concerned. It is always easy to approach a child in his/her own language. Moreover, children, especially in primary classes, feel closer to the teacher when he/she tries to say some words/simple expressions of their mother tongue and the language becomes a very impressive tool.

In primary classes, children have a difficult time adjusting to an alien language such as English. Most of our children are not conversant with English. If the teacher tries to speak in their own language or even says a few words, children feel at home. One important thing to note is, never joke about the mother tongue of children, or tease them about it. If you laugh at their language, they will hate you as well as the subject you are trying to teach, forever.

How does it help?

Let us look at Maharashtra as the majority of my experiences come from the two Kendriya Vidyalayas of Bhusawal and Napanagar. Napanagar is situated at the border of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. While teaching in Napanagar, I found students using words from Marathi while speaking to each other in Hindi. Their tone and expressions also resembled those

of Marathi. The remarkable thing was that for many of them, Marathi was not even their mother tongue! But I could hear expressions such as the following quite often when they tried to speak in Hindi:

1. *ye meraich hai.*

This mine only is.

This is mine only.

In Hindi it would be, *Ye meraa hii hai*. The use of *meraich* shows a Marathi influence.

2. *kaiko re!*

Why oh!

Why eh!

kaiko is used in Marathi in informal speech.

In writing, I found many ‘errors’ in the use of *matras* (symbols showing vowels and the length of time needed for their pronunciation), especially in the use of short and long ‘i’ and ‘u’. To correct such errors, a language teacher should first know why these happen. I examined the work of many students and discovered the following: They wrote the short sounds with a sign of the longer *matra* and vice versa. I listened carefully to the elders as well, and found that they also pronounced these sounds in a similar manner. One should understand that these are all ‘errors’ in the process of learning, and happen due to the language used around them, and children do eventually learn to write correctly. Thus, what we treat as mistakes and often punish our children for, are actually expected, and are simply an evidence of what they are learning from their environment.

Then what did I do?

I searched for a Marathi-speaking parent and discussed the problem with him. He said it was all due to the use of the wrong *wilanti*, which in Marathi means *maatras*. Therefore, the word ‘hindu’, was pronounced *hinduu* in Hindi, and

hiindu in Marathi (the short ‘i’ became long and long ‘uu’ short). The children also wrote it as *hiindu* when writing in Hindi; after all, in Hindi we want them to write as they speak!

So I thought it over and came up with a very simple solution. It may seem silly, but it worked. I asked the students to exchange the *matras* they intended to write, therefore they wrote ‘i’ in place of the longer ‘ii’, and the longer ‘ii’ whenever they intended to write a small ‘i’. After a bit they caught up with it and came up with a similar solution for correcting their small ‘u’ and long ‘uu’.

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Aspirated Hindi consonants

Now let us look at a Tamil-speaking child who is in class one. She/he is either new to Hindi, or has just learnt a few words in it. How would a Hindi teacher make her/him say the *mahaapraan*, i.e. aspirated sounds? Aspirated sounds are produced with an extra puff of air. That is what makes *kaanaa*, meaning ‘one-eyed’ different from *khaanaa* meaning ‘food’. Tamil does NOT have aspirated sounds. If a teacher understands that what is involved in producing an aspirated sound is just an extra puff of air, she would be able to help her students a lot. In this case, early intervention also helps, for once the tongue and other relevant parts of the mouth become habituated to speaking in a certain manner, it will be very difficult to correct the pronunciation. Even our brain will refuse to accommodate the new way of pronunciation. The first two classes of the Primary is the **best time** to perform this task.

Prior knowledge

Prior Knowledge is another obstacle in learning a new language, as we all know from our B.Ed. days. The language the child has acquired since the day she/he learnt to speak may pose some problems in the learning of an entirely new language.

For instance, in Tamil, there are three genders: masculine (M), feminine (F) and neuter (N) and in Hindi, we have only two.

In Tamil we have 3 forms of verbs to go with each gender, such as:

<i>avan poran</i>	<i>aval poral</i>	<i>adu poradu</i>
He goes	She goes	It goes

<i>wah jata hai</i>	<i>wah jati hai</i>	no separate words
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A child coming from a largely Tamil-speaking family will be flabbergasted! Where to put a chair or a table: In the masculine gender or in the feminine gender? In Tamil, both table and chair belong to the neuter gender, whereas in Hindi *kursii* (chair) is feminine but *mez* (table) masculine. My grandfather used to say:

relgaadi roz subaha samay par aatii hai par sham ko pataa nahiin kyon der se aataa hai?

“The Train is always on time in the morning; but I don’t know why it comes late in the evening?”

We could never make him understand the gender issue, and sometimes it would be hilarious just to listen to him and my grandmother talking to each other in Hindi, mixing all the genders! But we cannot laugh when our students do this; we have to teach them the correct rules. I do not suggest that all Indian languages should be learnt, just the ones that are spoken in the region or by the children in their respective classes, plus English.

I will relate one incident that my father told me. He had a Bengali friend. After their training,

they were posted to different stations. When they met after some time, my father asked him about his office, and he told my father that everything was okay but there was no *ghoraa* and *ghorii*.

My father was perplexed—why would a clerk need a *ghoraa* (horse) and a *ghorii* (mare) in an office? As some of you would have guessed, he simply meant *gharaa* ‘pitcher’ and not *ghoraa* ‘horse’; and *gharii* ‘watch’ and not *ghorii* ‘mare’.

Though this is a very good example, but it does not apply to a primary class where we have to be very careful not to let such situations get out of hand, or they might destroy the goodwill among the children. Everybody’s mother tongue is close to their hearts. Most of the children and parents are extremely sensitive to the issue of their language.

Some fundamental steps

- Within a week an efficient teacher must know what the mother tongues of the children in her/his class are. On an average there will be 4-5 different language groups in one class. It would be a good idea to make a list.
- Make all the children speak or read loudly. Make notes of the letters or words which need attention.
- Group the children according to their mother tongue, e.g. 5- Marathi speaking; 6-local language; 9-Hindi; and so on.
- Casually, ask the children synonyms of simple words that will appear in the text. Ask questions such as:
“What would you call a ‘chair’ in your language?”

Ask whether a word is masculine, feminine or neuter in gender. For this you may have to keep their age in mind. Therefore, in class 1 you may ask:

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kursii chhotii hai ki chhotaa?

Chair small FEM is or small MASC?

ped ooncha hai ki oonchii?

tree tall MASC is or tall FEM?

Asking these questions will encourage the children to think about these things; we can see that in English there is no change in the adjectives with the change of gender in the nouns.

Even in class 9, I had great difficulty in teaching the correct gender form of Hindi verbs to the Marathi, Tamil or Malayalam-speaking students, as they would mix them with the rules or norms of their own respective mother tongue.

I also did my best to instill respect for other languages in my students. Though they did not dare make fun of my mother tongue; I pushed the issue on them. I wanted them to come out with the strange notions that people usually have regarding South Indian languages. One or two boys said in a low voice “*idli, dosa*”, someone else said “*ai ayyai yo!*” They had heard these words so often in the Hindi cinema, that for them these were the only words Tamilians knew! One day I feigned real anger and told them about the rich literature of Tamil. I also pointed out the similarity in the vocabulary of Hindi and Tamil, and told them about its rich culture and fine arts

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easily switch over from one to the other. Both my children learnt Hindi, Tamil and English plus a bit of Urdu and a lot of Marathi just by living on the border between Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Being offspring of bi/multilingual parents also helps a lot.

Projects/assignments to promote

bi/multilingualism

Collect the following in the respective languages of the children

- Various expressions of welcome
- Names of relations (kinship) and finding similarities
- Alphabets of the mother tongue
- Words used in day-to-day living, such as names of vegetables, fruits and grocery.

Games to play in the class

- (1) This is a game which we used to play as children, during the summer holidays. We would select a letter and all of us would write names such as the following (the letter here being ‘n’):

Narendra - name of a boy; Neeta - name of a girl; Nagpur - a city; Narangee - a fruit; Nose - a part of the body; Namak (salt) - an object; Navrang - title of a movie; Naachnaa (to dance) - a verb, etc.

Similarly, an alphabet may be chosen, and each child may be asked to write one word beginning with that letter in their own language. This helped a great deal in letter recognition and vocabulary building, and also classifying words in different categories.

- (2) Pick out some sounds that are generally mispronounced, or sound similar in 2-3 languages, but change the meaning of the word, such as ‘Z’ and ‘J’. Many Persian and Arabic sounds and words have found

place in Hindi along with a few English ones. One such sound is 'Z', which is used both in English and in Urdu. Hindi also has a 'J' sound, and usually educated people also pronounce 'Z' as 'J'. Next, collect some homophones and explain the difference in their meanings. Ask the children to make sentences using the following words:

zara 'a little', *jara* 'old age'; *zamana* 'a particular period', *jamana* 'to curdle'

(3) A very interesting project may be given to the children by asking them to collect words that have a similar sound, but have entirely different meanings, such as:

1. 'more' - In English it denotes the comparative degree of 'much'; in Hindi it means 'peacock' the bird; in Tamil it means 'buttermilk'.
2. 'hii' - In English as well as Marathi, it denotes a masculine pronoun in third person 'he'; but in Hindi, it is either an adverb meaning 'only', or used for giving emphasis.

Many such words can be found in various Indian languages, and interesting short stories or jokes can be composed around them. So, aren't there limitless possibilities in using multilingualism as a resource! It is not difficult if our hearts are in it.

By bringing languages together, you will be working towards the solidarity and unity of the nation, and will always find a place in the hearts of your students.

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