

Multilingualism and the English Classroom

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Introduction

This article is intended for teachers teaching English along with other languages at the primary and secondary level in state government schools. It will answer the following questions:

- The Concept– What is multilingualism?
- The Process– What is multilingual pedagogy?
- The Practice– How does a multilingual pedagogy translate into classroom practice?

It will also attempt to address some important questions raised by teachers:

- How can we teach English to the children who speak minority languages when they do not even know Hindi?
- The minority child in our school does not have any support from home; her speech is very different from the languages of the school and the home. How can we teach English to such a child?

Let us begin by looking at these two cases:

Before entering school, children interact with people all around them – adults, children, shopkeepers, etc. The languages they speak or acquire, may not necessarily be the same as their home language(s). For example, Maithili lives on the border of Bangalore which is a few kilometres away from Kadappa in Andhra Pradesh. Maithili's maternal grandparents are from Kadappa and speak Telugu; Maithili's

parents speak Kannada but they drop Maithili at her grandparents' home every morning and go to work in the cloth mills nearby. They have many friends who drop in with their children, in the evening. These friends speak Kannada with Maithili's parents but some of them speak Tamil with their children as they are Tamilians settled in Bangalore. Everyday Maithili goes to a Rajasthani shop with her grandfather and plays with her friend who speaks Marwari while her grandfather chats with his Rajasthani friend.

When Maithili went to school she was quite happy with her teacher who spoke both Kannada and Tamil. Why do you think Maithili was happy? Very soon Maithili started learning English. She had already begun to pick up some English from the television, pamphlets and advertisements. She also noticed that the auto drivers who were her father's friends always spoke English with the people who they ferried. So she started paying attention to what they were saying. Would you say that Maithili's first language is Kannada or Telugu or both? What status would you give to Marwari and Tamil and what would be the status of English with respect to these languages?

This is the case with many suburban children who migrate from the rural areas bordering the metropolitan cities and encounter several languages. They automatically become multilingual and so the transition from home language to school language does not create a burden of incomprehensibility.

Let us now take the case of a small town child who belongs to a minority community.

Suleman's parents' work has brought them to Barmer, Rajasthan where the languages of the street are Marwari, Barmeri, Sindhi and Gujarati. Suleman comes from the Laman Tanda (community) which speaks a dialect of Telugu. In school, the language of communication as well as the medium of instruction is Hindi, but none of the children speak Hindi. They speak Marwari or Barmeri. The school teaches English from Class II onwards. The teachers speak Dhundhari, Shekhawati, Jhunjhunu and Churu languages at home. In the classroom, all transaction is done in Hindi; the children learn English in the English class. Suleman is baffled – he finds no support from home where his parents speak only their version of Telugu which does not have a script. His parents can manage because they are constantly with a group of labourers who speak the same language. In school, Suleman has no friends from his tanda. He has no clue about what is going on in the class. His teacher thinks he is dull because he cannot pick up the language. At home Suleman can do many things; he tends to the sheep and keeps count of them, measures various quantities of grains given out by the group's distribution system and looks after his younger brother and sister.

Suleman finds it difficult to cope in school because his language is not valued. Neither is there any place for his system of knowledge in school. While Suleman surely has the ability to learn any number of languages and gain knowledge through those languages, there are no bridges between his prior knowledge and his new learning. Eventually, Suleman will learn the languages of the street. But will he learn the language of the class room if his identity is denied?

What is Multilingualism?

Multilingualism has been defined by different scholars in different ways. A multilingual person is someone who has “the ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing: different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation and education” (Kemp, 2009, p. 15). Therefore, a person who switches or mixes codes to communicate effectively, or speaks many dialects, or is conversant in a diglossia ambience of the same language is considered multilingual according to this definition.

It is also necessary for our purposes to distinguish between additive and subtractive bi/multilingualism. Additive multilingualism enriches both the languages by their usage. Subtractive multilingualism on the other hand refers to the gradual loss of the first language as the second language dominates the learner's functional space in which case the speaker's language loyalty gets shifted to the newly acquired language. For example, if Suleman began to speak Hindi more and more, and soon forgot the Telugu dialect spoken at home, we would say that Suleman's language use demonstrates subtractive bilingualism. On the contrary, if Suleman's family retained use of their dialect of Telugu and even read some literature in it, while being fluent in Hindi and Barmeri, it would be an example of additive bilingualism.

In India, multilingualism has always been part of our cultural and social ethos. The richness and complexity of the Indian multilingual situation characterized by both individual and societal bilingualism may be ascertained from the fact that over 1652 ‘mother-tongues’ belonging to four different language families are spoken in India; the print media uses 87 languages, the radio 71, the schools 47 as media of instruction (Agnihotri, 2007, pp. 79-88).

The government of India always felt that ‘the one and only way to introduce multilingualism through a system of education is to make provision for the study of several languages in the curriculum’ (Srivastava, 2007, pp. 37-53). The Three-Language Formula emerged out of this consideration. The original principles that gave shape to the three language formula were that the mother tongue is the first language which the children must study from the very beginning in their school both as a subject and as the medium of instruction in order to derive maximum advantage from education (Srivastava, 2007, pp. 37-53). Apart from this, the formula also provided for the study of the regional language, Hindi and English. English was to be studied from class V onwards. However, giving in to the people’s aspirations, English is being taught from class I and many of our State Board schools are now using English as the medium of instruction.

Let us now look at the following case study and discuss the approach we should follow in the classroom.

A child from the Tharu community enters a school for the first time in a village in Uttarakhand. The child speaks Tharu at home. She has heard Punjabi spoken in the street. She is baffled when the teacher speaks to her in Hindi. She does not understand anything the teacher says, and amongst the forty children in the class, some of whom speak Tharu, some Bengali and some Punjabi while some speak a little Hindi, she is completely lost. She becomes more and more withdrawn day by day. The teacher thinks she is dull. Soon she drops out of school and helps her mother take care of her new born brother.

Let us now look at the Laman Tanda community.

The Laman Tanda (community) live on the outskirts of Pune. They are a migrant community, but they have been living on the outskirts of Pune for the last thirty years. They speak Laman dialect and in this generation at least one parent is educated. They are eager to send their children to school. However, the only school which will accept them and which they can afford is the municipal school where Marathi – the regional language of Maharashtra – is the medium of instruction. The Laman children have picked up a little Marathi in the streets but this is not the standard Marathi of the school. The teachers consider the Laman’s language to be vulgar and uncivilized. The children do not understand the teacher’s instruction yet they are very supportive of each other and manage to escape punishment by helping each other (Adapted from Shrinivasan, 2009).

Looking at these two cases, it is clear that children from marginalized communities speaking minority languages face huge challenges when they enter school. Some of the challenges include:

1. Children from marginalized communities come equipped with indigenous knowledge which is gained in their home language. The teacher may not know the language which may hamper such children’s ability for comprehension.
2. They usually have no literacy environment in their homes. They may thus not be able to participate in literacy activities which do not create a suitable environment.
3. It is possible that they may not have encountered the language of the school in their homes and street.

4. As language is tied to identity, these children may withdraw when they find their identity being denied.

Also, in both the cases discussed above, the home language of the child can never become the language of the classroom because there is no provision, at the implementation level, for tribal and/or marginalized languages to become languages of instruction in schools due to lack of affirmative action policies and politics. Therefore, in order to counter these problems, we have to create an inclusive space for minority language children when they first come across the language of the school and English. We cannot expect to make any progress by denying the children's home language and their prior knowledge. While this denial of home languages in school is never a deliberate process, it happens because we all have prejudices about the languages which we speak. We believe that standard and accepted languages are 'good', and those that the children from minority community speak are non-standard and hence 'bad'. Teachers also believe that standard languages are grammatical while non-standard languages lack grammar! However, the only person who can help these children is the teacher in the classroom and the best way in which the teacher can do so is through a multilingual pedagogy and by adopting a multilingual approach to teaching English.

What is a Multilingual Approach?

Multilingual approach believes in affirming the identity and culture of the child by welcoming her language in the classroom. We know that the best way for a classroom practice to make meaning to the child in the early years is through her prior knowledge which is couched in her language. Thus, welcoming the child's language in the classroom, helping her to express and celebrate her prior knowledge is the underlying principle of this approach. Secondly, the multilingual approach that we subscribe to believes in affirming and creating spaces for the development of the child's language along with the development of the target language in the early years. This approach works on the principle of cognitive development – in simple words, from familiar to unfamiliar, from context related to context independent. We shall see now how this spans out in pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework for a Multilingual Pedagogy

We will now examine why a multilingual pedagogy affirms the principles outlined earlier. What is the theoretical basis of this pedagogy? Let us look at the simple theoretical framework for language development given by Jim Cummins:

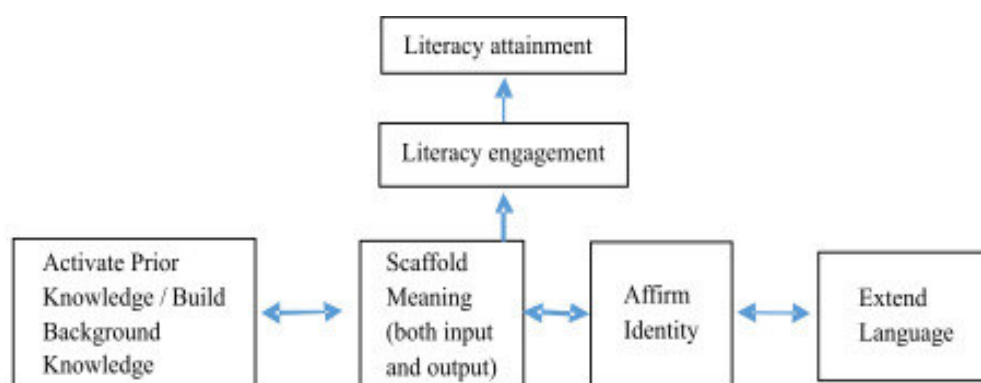


Figure 1. A pedagogical framework for promoting academic development in multilingual contexts. (Cummins, 2009, pp. 21-35).

Following this framework, I would like to suggest the following examples of multilingual pedagogy in the classroom for classes I to V.

Multilingual Pedagogy

Create space in the timetable of the school for a language activity class in which the following activities may be undertaken. This is a class where the home languages of the children and school languages are nurtured side by side. Hence, along with acquisition of the school language, maintenance and respect for home languages also happens in the classroom.

- Use the languages of children in the classroom: Begin with the child's language and introduce the school language through code mixing and code switching. For example: Begin your Monday morning class by discussing what the children did at home on Sunday, encourage the children to speak in their language, ask questions in the languages that children understand. Help every child to express himself / herself in his/ her language. Write what they have been saying on the board. Introduce some English words related to their talk on the board. Keep a stack of cards ready. Ask the children to think of one word they want to know related to the theme of the talk just recorded on the board. Write the word in their language (choose any script) and in English on the card. Give the card to them. Let them exchange cards, play with them take them home and bring them back. Do this every Monday.
- Create a Pictionary with the help of the children: A Pictionary is a picture dictionary. Ask the children to identify a word which they like in their language. Ask them to draw an image related to the word. Create cards with these words and images, add the English equivalent to the card, speak the word aloud in English and give the card to the children to examine and talk about.

- Make theme-based word walls in all the languages of the classroom: Ask the children to select a theme of their choice. Ask them to give as many words as possible related to the theme in their languages. Encourage a child whose language is very different from that of the other children in the class to speak. Now ask the children if they know English and Hindi words for the words used by the child. In fact, encourage the children to think of English and Hindi words along with the words in their languages. Welcome words in all languages based on the theme. Put them up on the walls. There will be different scripts –one for English and others for the different languages. This does not create a problem for the children. Remember the boundaries between scripts and languages are artificial boundaries. Modern advertising has overcome these boundaries. Once a word wall is ready, do several activities around it.
- Storytelling in the children's languages: This multilingual practice will slowly extend to storytelling in all the languages of the classroom. Introduce English through code mixing and code switching.
- Initiate projects to collect songs, stories and jokes from the children's languages by inviting parents to the school and follow through to create small picture books of stories from the children's languages rewritten in English and other school languages.

Some Questions

Q - Development of language needs practice along with acquisition of words. How will a multilingual pedagogy help?

A - We need to teach each language deeply and intensely; a multilingual pedagogy may lead to an inclusive classroom and the development of basic interpersonal communication skills but

each language requires to be learnt as well as acquired – we need to work with sound-letter relationships, vocabulary development, understanding of word formation and syntactic strategies, reading strategies and writing workshops. This is a very valid concern, but two languages can work together once the bridges are built. Most of our academic communication too can afford to be more multilingual to promote greater space for understanding and accepting different languages. We can have separate spaces for language development once the bridges have been built. However, maintenance of home languages must always be a part of this exploration.

Q - Is a teacher required to know all the home languages of the children?

A - This question is part of the paradigm that believes that a teacher teaches and a student learns. A teacher needs to create a space for the home languages of the children in the classroom. She/he need not be proficient but *receptive* to the home languages. Respect and value can be created by becoming a learner and learning together in the classroom. A teacher should be proficient in creating activities and spaces for such explorations and should have an open attitude rather than knowledge of children's languages.

Conclusion

Firstly, if we believe that multilingualism is constitutive of our identity, and that human beings are essentially multilingual, we cannot have monolingual classrooms. Secondly, education that begins with a denial of children's home languages has been proven to 'push out' children leading to a large number of uneducated youth, and huge inequalities in the social and economic life of the nation. A multilingual pedagogy will create spaces for larger choices for children who have been hitherto marginalized. It will lead to inclusive classrooms, more children in schools and higher maintenance of minority languages.

This will also lead to the minority languages and speakers having a fair chance of participating in the economic, political and social life of the nation.

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