



# Prenatal English? Why Not? Mother Tongue vs. English in Early Education

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When Pinky, a Saora tribal girl from Tumulo village in Gajapati district of Odisha, was born, her parents were happy. “Our Pinky will go to school”, said the father. Pinky’s mother was pleased to hear this. “That will be really good. We were not that fortunate. Pinky will be educated”, she said. Pinky grew up, started walking and, before long, held her father’s fingers to go to the village market. Amid all her playful time, she would smile and utter a few words – not quite clear but everyone around seemed happy with her baby talk. Soon she uttered broken sentences in Saora language to speak to her parents, villagers and other children. She addressed her parents in Saora, named the plants and trees, flowers and fruits and animals around in her village. Taking a ride on her father’s shoulder, she would gleefully count, along with her father, all the butterflies she saw on her way to Bagada<sup>1</sup>. The villagers were impressed with Pinky; “She is a clever girl!” they said. One day the village teacher said, “She is six-year old already. Send her to school.” Pinky’s parents were very happy taking her to school for her admission. Pinky was also happy. She got new books and notebooks from her school and proudly showed them to her mother, who said, “Your teacher will teach you how to read these books. I never learnt to read.”

Pinky went to school every day. But, gradually she became quieter. “What did you do in the school?” asked her mother. Pinky did not say anything. Her father said, “Has your teacher taught you to read this book? Read me a story.” Pinky remained silent. Gradually she became more and more silent and apathetic. She became irregular in school. One day the teacher confronted Pinky’s father in the village market, “Pinky is not coming to school regularly. And whenever I ask her any question, she bows her head down and remains silent.” The father was not happy hearing this. “Why don’t you go to school? You don’t

answer teacher, why?” he asked Pinki. “I don’t understand what the teacher says. I only see the pictures in the book, but, I cannot understand whatever the teacher reads from the book”. Her father understood. The teachers in the school speak in Odia which Pinki does not understand. He remembered his own childhood; he also left school for the same difficulty with the language of his school; it was not Saora. Before long, Pinki also stopped going to school.

Pinki and her father are not alone. Millions of children are pushed out of schools which impose a language on children ignoring the language in which they have learnt to speak, address their parents, and know plants, flowers, fruits, animals, ecology and members of their family and community. A child’s early language is the language of her first identity, all her early experience and learning, her relationship with her friends and elders, her understanding and strivings to find solutions. This language is adequate for her home, family, community and village and it empowers her to deal effectively with her social world. But, as she enters school, everything changes. The school opens its doors for her but there is an invisible and formidable boundary between her and the classroom. Suddenly her own language becomes useless and belittled by a dominant school language. All her understanding, her experience and her resources are suddenly devalued. Her language is no longer her asset; it becomes a liability. The language of the school is unfamiliar and it has no relation with her childhood, her experience, her social construction and her knowledge. How does she cope with the burden of a language that undermines her identity and distantiates her from her own experience? It comes as no surprise that many children are pushed out of school under the burden of an unfamiliar language.

<sup>1</sup>Bagada is a special cultivation site for the tribal people in Odisha.



It is, of course, true that in today's world, particularly in a multilingual country like ours, one language is not enough; school learning must involve multiple languages – mother tongue, the language of the region such as Tamil, Punjabi or Bengali, national level languages like Hindi and international language like English. But, why should children learn in their school a language that they already know? Why not go for an early start in another major language? The mother tongue is needed since the foundational knowledge for effective school learning of children is encoded in that language of their comprehension and expression. This language makes them school ready and, at the same time, they also need to take their language skills further. Even if children may appear to be competent in their early language, it is primarily used for social and interpersonal communication embedded in the immediate situation of home and community. School learning, on the other hand, involves complex and abstract concepts and use of language to master these concepts, to solve problems, to regulate one's own thinking and to think about language (as the object of thought). Schooling and early literacy instruction enable children to go beyond social and contextual use of language to the higher levels of use for regulated thinking, cognition and academic learning. Children's early language must develop to this cognitive and academic level with competence in thinking about language for scholastic achievement as well as for learning other languages.

On their entry to school, children from linguistic minority and tribal communities are burdened with a dominant school language with which they have little or no familiarity. Besides the burden of non-comprehension and resultant school failure, the school language fails to advance these children's language skills beyond the simple interpersonal communication and it has negative or subtractive effects on their mother tongue; as they learn the dominant language their mother tongue skills decline. While development of basic interpersonal communication skills in a language takes two to three years, the cognitive and academic language skills develop more slowly taking about six to eight years. Thus, mother tongue must be used as the language of early education and formal schooling for at least six years so that children develop the ability to use language for higher levels of thinking,

problem solving and multilingual proficiency besides ensuring scholastic success. In fact, early learning in the mother tongue happens at no cost to later learning of other languages; while children can develop conversational and social communicative competence in many languages early in their development, they acquire higher level literacy and academic skills in other languages much faster when their mother tongue skills are well developed beyond the early social use. This is the fundamental principle of mother tongue based multilingual education.

Children join school not as a clean slate, but as rich repository of knowledge; their language, experience and understanding are the resources for further development of language and literacy, mathematical concepts, environmental awareness in primary schools. Moving from early childhood and informal cultural experience to formal schooling is a major challenge for each child. The distance from home to school is not just physical; it is a psychological distance of cognitive, conative, and social readiness for school learning. Hence, prior to joining schools, between 2 to 6, children need a psychological, physical, social and intellectual preparedness to benefit from formal schooling. Early childhood education is for development of such readiness, in which language plays a significant role. Early childhood education bridges the development of children's language from social communication skills to use of language for thinking and effective classroom learning. On the 20th September, 2013, the Union Cabinet approved the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy which mandates education in child's mother tongue as a necessary preparation for school education for complete development and equal opportunities for quality education. Out of nearly 160 million children under six, 45 million are in private early childhood education programmes for which their parents have the means to pay. Nearly 75 million children are in the ECCE programmes (such as Anganwadis) of the Integrated Child Development Scheme of the Government. There is no ECCE opportunity for the remaining 40 million children. Thus, there is an unjust discrimination in the scope for development of human resources and potentials during the early childhood years. Hopefully, the draft policy, prescribing minimum ECCE standards, can

effectively deal with such discrimination. Section 5.2.4 of the draft policy says that “the mother tongue or home language of the child will be the primary language of interaction in the ECCE programmes”. The draft policy also suggests that given the young child’s ability at this age to learn many languages, exposure to the national/ regional language and English in oral form as required, will also be explored. Thus, the ECCE policy accepts the critical role of mother tongue for regulation of child’s thinking and reasoning skills and for cognitive and scholastic development and, at the same time, recognizes the robust research findings that multilingual children are more intelligent and creative compared to their monolingual counterparts. The problem is not with the development of multilingualism; it is with early education in a non-mother tongue language.

Parents, unfortunately, are impatient – eager to bring in English too early. English appears to be the language of power, progress and economic opportunities and, hence, the obsession to bring English as early as possible in homes as well as in early-childhood and school education. Such is the craving for English to the very young and immature children that if someone offers prenatal English education for babies still in their mothers’ womb, like the puranic Abhimanyu learning tricks of warfare, there will be long queues of takers. This current craze for English is irrational and unsupported by what is well known in educational principles – mother tongue is the royal road to quality education and effective learning of many languages including English. The modern Abhimanyus do not need English so early; they need good care, culture and mother tongue based quality education.



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