

Importance of Language

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The central importance of language in primary education and the child's command over it is widely accepted. It's not difficult to see the reasons for this wide agreement.

It's obvious that language is essential for communication, for the child as well as for everyone else. So is it essential for gaining understanding of all disciplines be it mathematics, sciences or any other. Indeed the child links to all aspects of education only through language. In fact, the child thinks, makes decisions and acts through and with language. Language is central to the child's (as everyone else's) existence as a part of society.

The above perspective is clearly necessary - in fact mandatory - if one has to appreciate the centrality of language to the child's education and growth. However, this is still a limited perspective. The limitation of this perspective is in viewing language as a "tool;" a "tool" to understand Mathematics or a "tool" to take decisions. Language may indeed be a tool, but it is also a lot more. This "lot more" is perhaps even more determinant of the centrality of language to the child, in education and in human life in general.

We humans not only see and feel the world around us, we also give meaning to everything that we see and feel around us. Thus when I observe the dark monsoon clouds, the effect on me is not merely the effect of seeing some shapes. It's the complex consolidated effect of relating and linking the dark clouds to rain, to dancing peacocks and to my discomfort of wet clothes. If I were not to make these connections and links, the dark cloud would mean nothing to me, will have no effect on me; it will just remain as a shape that I sensed.

It is this 'linking' that gives meaning to everything in this world. It is this infusion of meaning that changes the status of things (especially in our consciousness) from merely "being" to "being meaningful."

This meaningfulness we infuse through concepts. To develop and flesh out these concepts we construct a number of symbols in our psyche and develop relationships and links between the symbols and the concepts. Mental activity on these symbols ("symbolic transaction") is the process of this construction.

Language is the foundation of this symbolic transaction and is in fact an indivisible and integral element of this entire process, which leads to the construction of a "conceptual system" for any individual.

Without giving "names" to the concepts, none of this is possible. These "names" are what we know as "words" in language. The development and construction of the "conceptual system" is what we call the development and gaining of understanding. So, language and understanding are dependent on each other. The existence of one is not possible without the other.

Thus, language is not merely a "tool." It is an integral and inalienable part of understanding. It is capacitative of the human mind and self-consciousness, as, what is the human mind but the totality of understanding! It develops with the development of understanding, and is constrained when understanding is constrained. This conclusion is of critical importance to primary education.

It is possible that after a certain stage of development of understanding and language, there is enough of a foundational structure of either (or both) that understanding can continue to develop without a concomitant significant development of language and vice versa. But this "divisibility" is not possible at the primary education level, for sure. At the primary education level, development of language and development of understanding are two inseparable complementary aspects of the mental development of the child.

Let us also look at a few aspects of language.

The basic unit of spoken language is a word. The word is a combination of sounds. If this combination of sounds were not to be linked to a concept, it will remain merely a meaningless combination of sounds and not become a word. The linking of a particular combination of sounds (word) to a particular concept has no logical grounds or rules. This linkage is arbitrary. While the linkage is indeed arbitrary, it is stable and universal within the user of the particular language. "Tree" is a combination of sounds, which relates to a specific concept, this relationship remains stable. It is not as though some other combination of sounds will start relating to the concept after a while. For example, tomorrow another combination of sounds, "cricket" will not start relating to what is meant today by "tree", although the relationship of tree to that concept is as arbitrary as that of cricket.

To construct meaningful language, words are used with (and through) a system of rules. For example, the sequencing of words follows certain rules to create appropriate meaning. These rules are also arbitrary but stable and universal in nature. So, language is a rule governed system of verbal symbols through which humans create meaning. This system is well organized and is entirely man - made. While the number of sound combinations in (any) language is limited, the ability of the language system to construct meanings is infinite.

To learn a language is to gain command over and use this system for construction of meaning, acquisition of meaning and expression of meaning.

The spoken language is made of sound symbols, similarly the written language is made of visual symbols; or markings on a surface. The markings are letters. The letters of the alphabet (or their combinations) represent sounds. The relationship of these "markings" to the sounds is also arbitrary but stable and universal. We always (mentally) "translate" the written language to spoken language and then derive meaning from that. So, there are more steps to reach meaning through written language in comparison to spoken language.

In spoken language interactions, there is room and scope for "non-verbal communication" (e.g. expression

on one's face, gestures of hand) and also the scope for immediate clarification. This is not usually possible in written language, and hence written language also uses some additional symbols and follows a tighter system of rules.

The purpose of this brief article is not 'linguistic analysis', but simply to discuss some issues that may have direct bearing on teaching-learning at the primary level. Some of the conclusions that we have reached in this brief article are:

1. The development of understanding and the development of language are completely dependent on each other for a child.
2. The relationship between concepts and combination of sounds (called "words") is arbitrary and has no logical grounds. However, this relationship is universal and stable.
3. The rule systems for the use of words to form sentences and construct meaning are also arbitrary, however stable and universal.
4. So, language is a well organized symbolic system.
5. The ability of the language system to construct meanings is unlimited.
6. Letters in written language relate to and represent combinations of sounds. This relationship is also arbitrary but stable and universal.
7. To reach meaning from written language has one extra step vis-à-vis spoken language to meaning.

A quick hint at two of many implications of these conclusions for teaching-learning at the primary level: what is arbitrary cannot be figured out by the child alone. It necessarily needs observation of other language users, help from those who already have mastered that arbitrary relationship, demands practice and drill takes precedence over conceptual understanding. What is rule - governed can actually be mastered only by the child's conceptual engagement and conceptual understanding takes precedence over drill. Language learning may require both, though the over all learning process is marked by conceptual

understanding and meaning making; but drill cannot be discounted in certain processes like mastery over the writing system.

This small piece also has a few controversial claims; a word of clarification is in order about them. It is claimed that words are arbitrary ordered combinations of sounds. There is enough linguistics research to establish that the word formation follows certain universal rules in combining sounds. But even after adhering to those rules the overwhelming majority still retain the arbitrary character in combining sounds, and definitely in attaching concepts to them. The second claim is about the smallest meaningful unit of language being the word. There is the dominant view that the smallest meaningful unit is the sentence. While it is true that to express a knowledge claim, request, question etc. the sentence is the smallest unit; but to evoke an idea in mind the word is sufficient. And evocation of an idea has to be considered evocation of meaning.

The third claim is about the arbitrariness of order of words in a sentence. Again, linguistics research has established that there are universal patterns in all human languages that determine the order of words in a sentence. There are also claims that children never make mistakes in this order and that rules are innately grained in the human mind. Since there are more than one possible sentence structures and children do make mistakes, therefore there is the role of experience in learning it. Yes, there are universal patterns, though whether they are innate as specific language rules or are an expression of

human cognitive architecture is a controversial point. Therefore, the arbitrariness here is rather limited.

At several places, association between sound patterns and meaning, etc. is stated to be 'universal and stable,' within a linguistic community. This is in the limited sense of as far as it is understood and for a certain period. Languages do change in style as well as meaning associated to words, in time as well as over the community of its speakers. But, as far as they are commonly understood, they retain a character of being 'generally acceptable and stable.'

Lastly, language is central to becoming human. This aspect is not elaborated here, partly due to lack of space and partly because the focus is to underline some points that may be of immediate use in classroom language teaching.

This article has been adapted from the original Hindi version, titled "*Bhasha ke Maine*", published in the book, "*Shiksha aur Samajh*", by Rohit Dhankar (2004), Adhaar Prakashan, Panchkula, Haryana.

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What do we Mean by Language?

Krishna Kumar



Most of us are so used to defining language as a means of communication that we often forget its usefulness as a means to think, feel, and react to things. This wider use of language is extremely important for people who want

to work with young children, for in childhood, language plays a formative role in the development of the child's personality and abilities. It acts as a subtle, yet strong, force, shaping the child's perception of the world, interests, capabilities, and even values and attitudes.