'No Talking, Children!' Speech and Silencing in Language Classrooms: Of Difference, Dialogue and Learning

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This paper is an attempt to understand and analyse the language learning experiences of a child from a socio-economically weaker section attending an urban low-fee-private (LFP) school. Children from marginalized communities are caught in the multi-layered Indian school system which often forces them to attend inferior quality English-medium LFP[i] schools. With socio-economic differences, the learners' cultural capital, experiences of language use and abilities also vary. This paper analyses how these variations are converted to oppression instead of resources for learning for the underprivileged children.

To talk about linkages between language, cultural background and learning, Lankshear et al. provide the wonderful concept of 'D'iscourse. According to Lankshear et al. (1997), Discourse, with a capital 'D', can be understood as "the way of talking and thinking that is characteristic of a sub-group in the society." That is, the "combinations of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours, values, goals, beliefs and assumptions" that the subgroup practices and seeks to pass on to newcomers. The language component both shapes and is shaped by other components of Discourse.

Primary Discourses are those that family and kinship groups initiate young people into-our 'first ways of thinking feeling, and...using...our language', of learning to 'make sense' of life's experiences. Secondary Discourses on the other hand such as those that take place in schools, are 'encountered through participation in social institutions beyond the primary groups'.

Learners for whom primary and classroom Discourses are very far apart, find it difficult to perform well at school or even complete school (Lankshear et al., 1997). A larger number of learners than we usually imagine, lose confidence and interest, and are pushed out of school.

In this paper, I have combined the idea of Discourse, with Barnes' (2008) and Alexander's (2008) work on the role of speech and dialogue in learning.

Drawing upon Piaget's theory of learning and social constructivism, Barnes points out that new knowledge has to be internalized and appropriated as one's own through a process of "retrieving and transforming what we already know". So, learning is "working on (existing) understanding" which can most readily be achieved through talk. He further argues that writing and speech have distinct roles to play in language teaching-learning, and speech must not be neglected. However, as we know, Indian classrooms focus on writing to the exclusion of all other ways of using language.

Barnes also distinguishes between presentational talk which is tailored to audience expectations, and presented to them for "evaluation", and exploratory talk, which is "hesitant, broken, full of dead ends and changes of direction", but tremendously useful for understanding and appropriating of new knowledge. Alexander builds on presentational and exploratory talk, and other work, to talk about the "pedagogy of the spoken word". Classroom dialogue, he argues, has a purpose and an end point, unlike

conversations. This purpose is clear to the teacher, who must direct the dialogue without discouraging children from working on their understanding through it. Her role is to determine when such talk is required[ii], to facilitate it, and to ensure that it is not reduced to imitation or a search for the 'right' answers.

So, in order to give speech and dialogue their rightful place in language teaching-learning, classrooms must welcome the experiences and reflections of the learners. Further, for children whose primary Discourses are very different from their classroom Discourses, schools / teachers must work towards understanding these differences[iii] and their implications for teaching-learning. They must also help such children build on existing knowledge and linguistic abilities through participation in classroom Discourse.

This case study[iv] was conducted in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. At the time of participating in this study, Ajju was a bright-eyed, intelligent eight-year old boy with a terrific sense of fun, and a marvellous ability to amuse himself and his baby sister. His mother was a domestic worker and his father, a daily-wage construction worker. His first language was Nimari, but he could read, write, and speak Hindi well[v]. When not at school, he accompanied his mother to work to take care of his eleven-month old sister Anjali, or stayed home with her. He studied in class II in an English-medium section of a nearby LFP school. In English, he could only identify individual letters of the alphabet, and the words 'done' at school. He displayed an eagerness to learn and communicate when outside school. The school was housed in a very small building, had a common toilet, and no playground. It had mostly under-qualified and under/un-trained teachers. The six students of class II shared a classroom with six other students of class I. Neither the Principal, nor Ajju's language teacher, Sunita, could speak much English.

I studied how Ajju's primary Discourse differed from his classroom Discourse, primarily in terms of talk; and how that affected the opportunities for classroom-talk. I see this as part of a larger agenda to understand how existing classroom Discourses disenfranchise children whose cultural contexts cannot provide the kind of rigid training demanded for success at school.

What Happened in the Language Classroom

The primary differences I found in the talk in Ajju's classroom and his home[vi], pertained to the terms of talk-Ajju's status, his participation in talk, the affective component of his relationships with adults, and the content of interactions in the two settings.

In the classroom, Sunita controlled all interactions, particularly, learners' talk[vii]. Except for one girl who usually provided the 'right' answers to Sunita's questions, none of the other children initiated a conversation with Sunita, except to ask for information on homework submissions or test dates. Sunita decided what words children needed help with, and disapproved of their asking for help from each other. Her talk with the children was limited to asking and answering "closed questions" (Alexander, 2008), evaluating answers as right or wrong, and scolding them. She did not stop or try doing things differently if anyone looked confused or uninterested.

Therefore, the conversation in the classroom comprised presentational talk in which Ajju never participated. He did not ask or answer questions, or draw Sunita's attention to himself in any way, except when he missed school. On these occasions, he got sarcasm and humiliation for not taking school seriously. On the other hand, at home there was ample opportunity for exploratory talk. Ajju referred frequently to his conversations with his uncle, grandfather or cousins. He seemed comfortable asking questions from them, or discussing movies or vehicles, etc.

Sunita equated understanding a lesson with 'doing' the 'difficult words' in it. While she regularly dictated meanings, and exhorted children to remember them, she did not make any effort to relate the new words, ideas, stories or poems with anything the children may have read / heard / felt / discussed outside the classroom. Therefore, Sunita did not attribute any ability or knowledge to Ajju (or the other students) outside of what had been done in class, particularly, something that could help him develop his language skills in Hindi / English. This approach denied the cognitive and emotional abilities that Ajju had developed in his cultural context. Clearly, Sunita followed the 'empty receptacle'[viii] concept of learners.

Within the environs of his primary Discourse, Ajju's status was completely different. He helped his family survive by taking care of Anjali and therefore allowing his mother to work. He was also responsible for learning his role and position in the extended family. At home, he was constantly in dialogue with his sister and making sense of their relationship, his role, and of babies (their behaviour, needs, development trajectory). Why was this tremendously significant process of meaning-making not seen as important cognitively, linguistically and socially?

Another important difference between the primary and secondary Discourse lay in the nature of relationships. His relationships with his family at home and his classmates in the classroom determined the quality and nature of his talk with them. He seemed comfortable with most family members, and could rely on them to take care of him. Most importantly, they were usually ready to hear his side of things, and saw him as a capable person. Unlike in these relationships, the affective component was missing in his relationship with Sunita. While this absence was also caused by the institutional context in which Sunita was working[ix], most teachers do not feel accountable to parents or children if the families are poor and illiterate.

So, not surprisingly, Sunita often threatened, ridiculed and punished her pupils. Consequently, once inside the school gates, Ajju's eyes would lose their twinkling curiosity and the ready smile and bubbling laughter would vanish. He would become quiet, wary, cautious, and not relaxed, warm or friendly.

Another difference between the school and home settings lay in the fact that Ajju had to be a rather one-dimensional person at school. For example, there would be rows over his father's drinking, but at school he was supposed to be engrossed in spellings and meanings, and not worry about what was happening at home. He and the other students were often humiliated for coming to school without books or proper uniform. Ajju had nowhere to keep his books safe so they were often eaten by mice. Sunita was also often sarcastic about guests or festivals being more important than studies.[x] Ajju's mother relied on her natal family for moral and financial support, so maintaining ties with them was important for the family. But these reasons for absence or not finishing the homework did not count with Sunita. Therefore, instead of investing his intelligence in learning, Ajju invested it solely in understanding school rules and trying to survive without unpleasant experiences.

Lastly, work at school was often about unfamiliar people, places and ideas; Ajju was never given the time or the freedom to express and explore his own ways of relating to them. If he could learn reading, writing and speaking in English in the context of his experiences and ideas, he would be more confident and feel less pressured. For example, writing or speaking about his sister's antics, or his unique method for finding his sharpener[xi] would be a great motivation for learning for Ajju. In addition to that, the impact on his self-esteem as a person whose ideas and experiences count, and who is a capable learner, would be tremendous.

It is clear from Ajju's case study that teachers and curriculum designers neglect the linkages between a child's abilities across multiple languages. So, English is taught in isolation from Ajju's knowledge and fluency in Nimari and Hindi.[xii] A new language is imposed on him without helping him make sense of why learning it is necessary, or how to relate to it, or transfer his linguistic abilities from Nimari and Hindi to English.

Finally, Sunita's knowledge of English language and language pedagogy in general was apparently very limited. She provided incorrect explanations, explained in difficult Hindi, ignored mistakes in the identification of sounds and letters, and associated sounds with written letters incorrectly.

What do we Need to Worry About?

It is evident that everything that Ajju is, and can do, is denied by the classroom Discourse to a large extent. The institutionalized teacher-pupil-curriculum relationship does not acknowledge the relevance of speech to learning, or the linkages between Ajju's experiences and his language learning. So how can there be a dialogue among the learners or with the teacher, which will aid learning? As Dennison (1969) rightly points out, "there is no such thing as learning except in the continuum of experience. But this continuum cannot survive in the classrooms unless there is reality of encounter between the adults and children." Interestingly, Sunita studied in the same school. Therefore, at least as a learner, she was in a similar socio-economic category. Yet, she was not sensitive to her pupils' abilities and constraints, and imparted education of the same inequitable quality that she most probably received.

This case study backs Dennison statement that "teachers must be themselves and not play roles" in order to understand and help learners. But rigid, top-down institutional frameworks do not allow teachers to be themselves. Further, teachers are not trained to appreciate the importance of reflecting on their practice, their own growth and problems. Another broken continuum-they have never seen the connections between their educational experiences, socio-economic background, their teaching and their learners. So how can there be such a thing as dialogue except in the continuum of experience for both teachers and pupils?

Finally, Alexander (2008) argues that we need to grasp the connections between literacy, education and democracy. Education needs to be linked to the practice of democracy through the learners' ability to participate in it. Instead of helping young people develop the ability to reflect on and articulate thoughts, ideas and feelings important to them-in short, develop a voice-language classrooms tend to silence them, both literally and figuratively. For children like Ajju, whose only hope for upward social mobility lies in schooling, there can be no greater oppression in and through education.

Endnotes

i. Terminology and classification borrowed from Srivastava (2006). These refer to a category of schools in urban areas that cater mostly to families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The appeal of these schools lies in the fact that they offer education in English which most state-government schools do not.

ii. Talk about how he does not argue that only talk is required for learning but that it must form a crucial part of teacher's repertoire and be used as such.

iii. These must not be perceived as deficiencies in particular socio-cultural contexts, neither by curriculum designers and teacher educators, nor by teachers or learners themselves.

iv. All names changed. About research method: I observed the child's Hindi and English language classrooms, both taught by the same teacher. I took notes on non-verbal interactions and behaviours, and recorded proceedings with the permission of the teacher and the principal of the school. I had earlier obtained permission from Ajju and his mother for his participation in this study. I also recorded and analysed conversations between Ajju, his sister and myself at his residence. I have transcribed all the recordings myself.

v. In and around Indore, Malvi and Nimari are the first languages for a large number of people. Most of them are comfortably bilingual and speak fluent Hindi. Ajju had picked up Hindi before joining school, however he learnt reading and writing at school and loved to read storybooks in Hindi.

vi. Though primary Discourses are definitely not limited to what happens at home, this was what was most accessible in Ajju's case. Ajju did not have many playmates in the area as he was living close to a construction site in an upper middle class locality and did not have friends. Typically a worker's family work as guards for under-construction buildings and the worker sometimes gets paid a little more for this work. So, my data on primary Discourse comes from Ajju's conversations with his family members and my observations.

vii. Excerpts from a conversation between Ajju and myself:

Ajju: 'wo to ko . . . main to jara bi nai karta kyonki sabko maar padti hai, mujhe nai achha lagata ki mujhe bi maar pade' (no body. I don't talk at all because everyone is beaten, I don't like that I should also be beaten.)

Reva: 'nai, wo……aur bhi to kuch baat kar sakte hain jisse maar nahi pade (short laugh)'

(no, . . .we can talk about something which does not result in getting hit?)

Ajju: 'madam se hi bolna padata hai, main to unse . . .madam se hi karta hoon ki maar na pade' (have to speak to madam only, I . .talk to her . . .to madam only, so that I don't get beaten.)

'Madam' obviously has very rigid views about talking (recording from classroom):

Madam (shrill, disapproving, unpleasant tone): 'Aur apne skool me bi agar apan anushasan se rahenge to apne teacheron ko bi achha lagega, samajh me aaya? Jaise ki agar tum skool me padhne aate ho to padho; baat cheet karne aate ho to padho. . . baat cheet karo. Baat cheet karne aate ho kya skool me? Padhne aate ho na? To phir padhai kara karo; baat cheet mat kiya karo jaise tum log karte ho beech-beech me. Tum ko baat cheet karne ke liye lunch ka samay diya jaata hai, us samay mein tum baat cheet karo kuch bi karo.' (And if we stay disciplined in school our teachers will also like it, do you understand? Like, you come to school to study, so study; if you come to talk . . .then study . . . talk. Do you come to school to talk? You come to study right? Then, do study! Don't talk like you do sometimes in the middle. you're given lunch time for talking, at that time you can talk, do anything.)

viii. From Paulo Freire's theorizing of the 'banking concept' of education. Reference provided in the reference section.

ix. She is underpaid, as almost all LFP school teachers are in Indore. She also does not know English herself, but has to prove to herself that she can control the children and complete the syllabus on time. The school runs two shifts and hence a period is quite short. Further, children are not given any time to play or draw or do anything at school. They just have five to six straight periods

studying different subjects, and then they go home. The lunch break is short too. The entire atmosphere is depressing, cheerless and suffocating.

x. Sunita getting sarcastic over a child having missed school:

Boy: 'Madamji hamare yahan mehman aaye the!' (madam ji, we had guests!)

He's obviously excited about it. But she responds with:

Sunita: 'Mehman jaroori hai apni class jaroori thodi hi hai. Hai ki nai? Sai hai na? Hai na mehmanon jaroori hain, skool aana jaroori nai hai!' (Guests are important, our class is not important. Yes, or no? Right, isn't that? Aren't guests important? Coming to school isn't important!)

xi. Anjali frequently threw Ajju's sharpener under their bed. He had developed a method to get it out from there without having to look under the bed himself. He used the magnetic property of the sharpener blade, the wheels of a broken toy car and a magnet he had found somewhere, to find the sharpener. He explained the method to me in Hindi and demonstrated it too.

xii. Here is an example of his grasp of Hindi and ability to express himself:

Ajju: 'La de de' (Come on, give it to me.). He was asking Anjali to hand him what she was playing with.

Reva:'Degi nai' (laughing), she won't give it)

Ajju (laughing gleefully): 'Khel ri kabaddi!' (She's playing kabaddi!)

This is an example of 'symbolization': Anjali was pretending to give the object in her hand to him, but not actually handing it over. He called these antics of hers, 'kabaddi'-a sport in which one has to dodge opponents who are trying to catch them.

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