

Research Article

Choice of Language in School: An Enquiry into Teacher Attitudes towards Multilingual Education

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ABSTRACT

Schools, being an integral part of our society, are sites of multitude of languages as children come from various socio-linguistic backgrounds. Does our educational system accommodate societal multilingualism? The study reveals that there is a disconnect between the way language is perceived and handled in schools (in the school syllabi, teaching materials and classroom transactions) and the way language actually exists in society. Multilingualism is perceived as multiple separate languages in society; however, the way it actually exists is in the form of internal variation and fluidity within languages. The qualitative and quantitative study of teacher attitudes on language and learning shows that language, as it exists in society, is misconstrued and rejected in schools. Furthermore, the article explores the consequence of language exclusion on children. We attempt to draw the reader's attention to our understanding about the way language exists in society. The way language exists in society should be the crux of discourse about education. This understanding of language is essential to democratise classrooms and ensure value and quality in education.

Keywords: Language education, Multilingualism, Teacher attitudes, Linguistic stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

India is home to thousands of languages (dialects). The question of language in education has always been a matter of much debate and controversy in India since the colonial era. Choice of language as the medium of instruction and of learning and teaching specific languages as part of the curriculum has been contested from time to time. Schools are institutionalised to provide a formal learning space for children. As integral

part of our society, they are sites of multiplicity of languages with children from multiple socio-linguistic backgrounds. However, schools and classrooms are hidebound by the idea that only one or two languages should be part of the learning experience. This disconnects between the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous society and the school and the rationale for the use of a standard language in school is the crux of our enquiry. Le Page (1968); Mparutsa *et al.* (1992) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) among others have looked at the questions emerging from this context with different perspectives. In this context, we enquire: What is the nature of language used by students for their interaction with various interlocutors? In adhering to strict bilingualism, how do teachers perceive language and learning? How does teachers' perception about languages affect children in learning and using languages?

Through a mixed-method study, set in six Kendriya Vidyalaya schools¹ using a sample size of 100 students from lower primary classes, we analyse the repertoire of the students to investigate the nature of language. Drawing insights from innateness principles underlying language we attempt to understand how children learn languages (Chomsky, 1988; Pinker, 2007); how children learn to use language (Gumperz, 1997); how the many languages that a child is exposed to from stage of acquisition interact in a social setting (Agnihotri, 2007) and thus shape children's experience and whether their languages are given the rightful place in a controlled school setting.

Teachers are the major players in the classroom. The perceptions of teachers influence the nature of classroom interaction and student performance. Hence, to study the schools' perception of language and learning, we examine the different ways in which teachers perceive language. These were studied by examining their notions about (a) the role of first language(s) in the learning of a second language, (b) the usage of various languages in the classroom and (c) the inclusion and exclusion of regional and vernacular languages in teaching. This will help us address and examine the various linguistic biases and stereotypes, if any, shared among teachers, redress them and outline a possible framework for an effective language classroom.

With an emphasis on joyful learning,² the KV Sanghatan has adopted an activity-based approach for teaching at the primary level. A constructionist framework that focuses on building knowledge through existing knowledge has also been adopted to optimise learning. In the course of this study, we tried to ascertain whether teachers put this framework in practice by building on the existing language base of the children. From

¹The six Kendriya Vidyalayas include KV CLRI (Central Leather Research Institute), KV IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), KV Ashok Nagar, KV Island grounds, KV No.1 Tambaram, KV No.2 Tambaram.

²Learning that is engaging, empowering and playful with an emphasis on meaningful content in a loving and supportive community.

our field study, it became clear that teachers lack an understanding of certain important aspects of language learning and use among children. Children are equipped with multiple languages (multilinguality) by the time they start their schooling. Multilinguality aids learning. Teachers, on the other hand, misguided by a set of linguistic biases and stereotypes perceive multilinguality as a hindrance to learning of ‘school language’ and to the smooth functioning of classroom. Based on the study, we would like to argue that instead of ‘teaching’ a language through grammar, the study of language should be based on ‘language seen as multilinguality’ perspective (Agnihotri, 2014). Such an understanding will result in a student friendly classroom experience where learners reflect on patterns of language use and develop the skills required for effective learning.

Section 2 is a literature review of major issues in the domain of language in education. The review is structured around three major themes: a) the E-language & the I-language b) the language in education and c) multilinguality. The final section of the literature review addresses the gap in the literature. Section 3 contains an overview of the methodological framework used, namely mixed-method approach, and details the components of both the quantitative and qualitative methods employed in the study. Section 4 presents a brief summary of our observations and findings in response to the research questions and section 5 contains a summary of findings along with concluding arguments and recommendations for future actions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURES

E-Language and the I-Language

India, a mosaic of different cultures, religions, and beliefs, is home to a number of different languages. The 1971 census records 1652 languages belonging to five different language families in India. Pandit (1969, 1972, 1988); Pattanayak (1986, 1990) among others have worked extensively in characterising Indian multilingualism. Quite often, geographically separate and genetically unrelated languages share common features. Emeneau (1956), for example, has observed that India’s Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages shared a number of features that were not inherited from a common source, but were areal features, the result of diffusion during sustained contact. This informs us that language is fluid and flexible in nature. Agnihotri (2014) argues that boundaries do not exist among languages as they are porous in nature. Languages flow into each other continuously, changing themselves, and there is no way of demarcating where one language really ends, and the other begins. Therefore, moving past the conventional understanding of language as a single monolithic entity, we draw our insights from the theoretical perspectives that consider fluidity and heterogeneity of language as central to language in society. Language, however, is not just a societal phenomenon; it’s internal

to human mind. In understanding language as a human capacity, particularly with regard to acquisition and learning, we borrow from a tradition of research wherein language faculty is considered innate and universal (Chomsky, 1957, 1965, 1986, 1988, 1993). According to Chomsky, language is the knowledge in human mind and the ability to learn languages is innate and hardwired into the brain. This language faculty consists of principles and parameters that help children figure out the grammar of the languages to which they are exposed. Language acquisition is, therefore, an effortless biological process as children are born with an innate language faculty that enables them to acquire language(s) effortlessly from their immediate society. Therefore, considering its fluid nature both as a phenomenon internal and external to us, this article adopts the concept of multilinguality, differentiating it from multilingualism as espoused by Agnihotri (2014). Multilinguality is the innate ability of the child that helps her to acquire and use languages effortlessly. It is responsible for the fluidity of her linguistic behaviour. The way language exists in society is multilinguality. Multilinguality therefore ‘negates the concept of “a language” and is located in the concepts of variability and fluidity of linguistic behaviour and...social behaviour’ (Agnihotri, 2014) Multilingualism, on the other hand, demarcates languages as multiple languages (L1, L2, L3 and so forth) and therefore gets redefined as multiple monolingualism (Heugh, 2013) Multilingualism regards languages as ‘separate entities often independently represented in human mind and largely kept separate in social behaviour’ (Agnihotri, 2014).

The Language in Education

Schools, being an integral part of our society are also a site of many languages as children come from various socio-linguistic backgrounds. However, schools value and insist on the use of a dominant language. Hence, quite often there is a mismatch between the language used by the student at home and society and the language they are expected to learn and use at school. These mismatches often lead teachers to underestimate the language ability of students as they fail to realise the use of students’ home language(s). Numerous research studies have examined the consequences of this mismatch on students whose language is different from the language that the school values as may be seen in Cummins (1981); Dua (1986); Mohanty (1990); Pattanayak (1990); Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) to name a few. Jhingran (2005), for example, elucidates how school turns out to be an unfamiliar place teaching unfamiliar concepts in an unfamiliar language. He notices children from a minority community refraining from attending classes when the language of the classroom was Hindi. The effects of mother tongue exclusion add a new dimension to the existing problem at a later stage. Cummins (2001) argues children’s mother tongues are fragile and easily lost in the early years. This makes them lose their connection with their culture.

Multilinguality—The Untapped Resource

Such studies on language exclusion in schools have made numerous suggestions to make classrooms a more democratic space. One of the most prevailing dictums is that a child is best educated in her mother-tongue. However, as pointed out by Agnihotri (2014), MTB (Mother tongue-based) education, as per most of the linguistic and related studies, are thinking in terms of standard bilingualism involving two distinct languages. This bilingual model is applicable to the West where children have a distinct first language and learn a second language later in their high school. The model, in the Indian context, fails to accommodate neighbourhood multilingualism that children bring with them to the schools. The language strategy to be adopted in linguistically heterogeneous classrooms (like KV schools) is not studied in detail. This article tries to bridge this gap by suggesting the scope of multilinguality as a teaching strategy and a resource in linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classrooms. Multilinguality calls for an elaborate understanding of language, both as a phenomenon internal and external to us. As espoused by Agnihotri (2014), unlike the multiple monolingualism view of multilingualism ‘assumes that there is always a dominant language of the community and there is a target language towards which children must progress’, the multilinguality perspective ‘treats the multilinguality of each child in the classroom as a resource and uses it for the ongoing linguistic and cognitive growth’ A scientific understanding of language, and its learning in terms of universal grammar, innate hypothesis, language acquisition, cognitive ability, structural similarities and dissimilarities, and linguistic diversity in society is essential to develop a holistic perspective on language. Not taking multilinguality and its interface with education into cognisance would lead to severe gaps in theory and praxis because of the lack of sensitivity to the context of language, its multiple modes and layers of existence. Language defined as multilinguality should be at the heart of our discourse about education. To make multilinguality possible, it is important for us to identify stereotypes around language and learning and subject them to discussions; which is the main focus of this article. In conclusion, we will argue for a research perspective that is needed for a holistic and inclusive education.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted over a two-month period in 6 different Kendriya Vidyalaya schools situated in the central and peripheral areas of Chennai city. Kendriya Vidyalayas are schools that are part of a system of centrally administered schools operating under the Ministry of Human Resources Development. The KVS has 1086 schools operating under it, 3 of which are situated overseas. It is affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and follows a uniform curriculum in all its schools. This ensures

uniformity and continuity in the education of the wards of government employees, who get transferred throughout the country during their employment. The standard practice of the Kendriya Vidyalaya schools has been to give priority to the wards of central government employees during the admission process. However, the recent Right to Education Act stipulating 10 seats to be allotted to first-generation learners living within 5 to 6.5 kilometres of every government-run school, which is applicable to the KVS, the previously unrepresented socially and economically underprivileged children of the schooling age are also included, guaranteeing an unparalleled social, cultural and economic diversity in the sample space.

The classroom strength ranged from 30 to 40 students, with an equal gender ratio. The classroom population was culturally and linguistically heterogeneous. The tools used for the study are surveys, interviews and observation. Applying both qualitative (semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and content analysis) and quantitative (Likert scale questionnaire) research techniques, the study relies on mixed-methods approach. This study relies on the Mixed Methods Approach. The dependence on only one method can bias or distort the researcher's illustration of the case she is studying (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). This explains the rationale for exercising mixed-method approach for the study.

In the first phase, a simple survey was conducted with 100 students from primary classes in order to understand the overall student language profile. Through a semi-structured interview, students were also engaged in conversations on topics like family, school, friends, languages used among various interlocutors, their likes and dislikes, favourite subjects and teachers, difficulties faced in learning and using languages. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

In the second phase, Likert scale surveys were conducted among 60 teachers from six KV schools. Likert scale questionnaires were used to study the teacher's attitudes and beliefs towards the various aspects of language learning and use among children. The questionnaire contained five-point Likert scale items that were rated as 'strongly agree', 'partially agree', 'not sure', 'partially disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. In order to not force a choice upon the respondents, a neutral option 'not sure' was included in the scale. Modifications were made in the questionnaire after conducting a pilot study at KV IIT Madras with 10 teachers. From the pilot study, it emerged that teachers were hesitant to respond to the questionnaire running in two pages, citing time as a constraint. Based on their relevance to the research question, fifteen questions were cut down into a one-page questionnaire with eight questions. The final questionnaire was aimed at eliciting information about the teachers' beliefs on a) linguistic heterogeneity of classrooms b) role of the first language/mother tongue (henceforth L1) in learning of second language

(henceforth L2, in this study English) c) use of LI in classrooms d) acquiring better proficiency in L2 and e) the inclusion of regional languages in the schools. The responses collected through the Likert-scale survey were coded numerically on MS Excel and analysed through simple mathematical percentage analysis. Additionally, semi-structured interviews, involving simple conversations on the themes discussed in the survey were also conducted.

Observations are an important aspect in this study. In-classroom observations made included both language (English, Hindi) and non-language periods (EVS, Mathematics). On the other hand, morning assembly, playtime, mass PT sessions, etc. were part of the class observation. The observations allowed me to understand the language practices of the students within and outside the classrooms and teacher response to students' use of regional languages and English in school. The quantitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews and observation was studied through a simple descriptive analysis.

ON THE NATURE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE

In this section of the article, we present a brief summary of the observations, analysis and findings in response to the research questions as discussed above. First, we attempt to understand the nature of languages by exploring the linguistic capabilities of students. We will analyse their daily interactions and language repertoire.

Multilinguality—The Norm

We asked students about the number of languages used in their interactions in various practical domains of language use, in order to study their linguistic capabilities. The following responses are illustrative:

Respondent 1: *I speak with my parents and relatives in Kashmiri, Hindi and English. With all others, I use English and Hindi.*

Respondent 2: *I speak Bhojpuri and Hindi with my parents and relatives. I have spent two years in Hyderabad and Chennai. So, I know some Telugu and Tamil. In school, I use English and Hindi to communicate with my teachers. With my friends, I speak English, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu.*

Respondent 3: *I speak Urdu with my parents. I use Tamil, Telugu and Urdu among relatives and neighbours. To my teachers at school, I speak English and Hindi and among friends, I use Tamil and English.*

Out of the 100 students we interviewed, 9 of them used only two languages, 63 students used at least three languages, 23 students spoke four languages and 5 of them used five

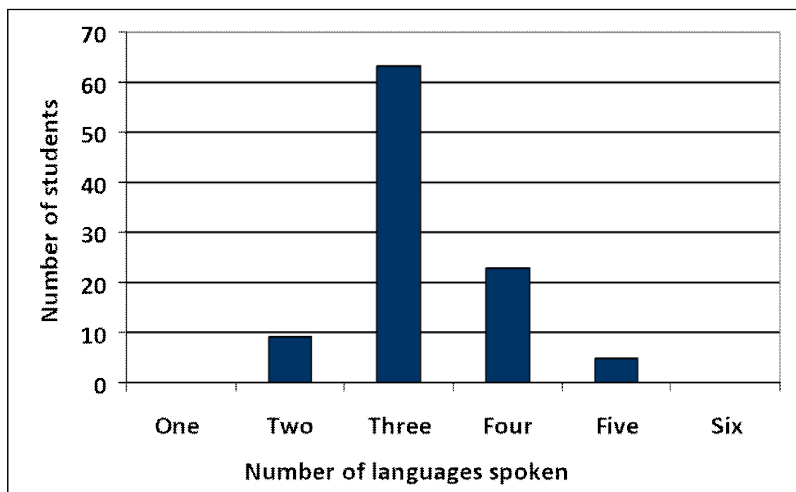


Figure 1: The Graph Represents the Number of Languages Spoken by the Students

languages to communicate with various interlocutors for their daily interactions. None of the students were found using only one language. The highest number of responses recorded was that of strong multilingual category.³ Other studies like (Agnihotri, 2007) have made resembling conclusions. The responses collected and analysed reveal that students are already proficient in multiple languages by the time they start their schooling. This shows that children have a strong multilingual base. During class observations, it was noticed that even the first-grade students, in their interactions, borrowed sounds, words and the rules governing sentence formations from multiple languages. They indulged in code-mixing and code-switching effortlessly, thus coming up with phrases like ‘This boy is killifying me’,⁴ ‘akka..you are a new teachera?’⁵ etc. This simply means that the concept of ‘a language’ does not actually exist and what really exists as one language are truly many languages. Hence, in considering its plurality and diversity, language gets defined as multilinguality. As Agnihotri (2014) points out ‘it is multilinguality, and not a language.... that is constitutive of being human’. In the following sections, we will investigate multilinguality in detail.

Multilinguality—The Mental Grammar

We shall begin our inquiry on multilinguality by briefly analysing a few sentences from respondents in schools. In the class, a young student enquired about her new teacher’s

³We have used a concept of multilingualism which is based on multiple individual languages like L1, L2, L3 however we adhere to the concept of multilinguality as espoused in Agnihotri (2014).

⁴This boy is pinching me’

⁵Are you a new teacher?

name: *'ma'am, your name what?'* This sentence, beyond its overt ungrammaticality, reflects the influence of mother tongue. The child borrows the rules of question-formation from her mother tongue Tamil, which translates as *'unga peru enna?'*⁶ In Tamil, a question can be formed by using a question word in situ. She transfers the rules of her first language in the use of a second language, namely English. This influence is known as native language transfer. Also, in leaving out the verb 'is', the student exhibits the principle of economy. The linguistic economy principle aims to save more energy and time to convey information with minimum effort. Chomsky (1993) proposed the Principle of Economy. It states that our ability to acquire and use language in a highly minimalistic, systematic and organised design is indicative of a particular mental organ that devises the way language works. This brings to the fore, the role of the brain in the learning and use of language. The connection between brain and language explains the errors or ungrammaticality in kid's code-mixed usage as an emerging language system in the mind of a second language learner. It demonstrates that the development of rules or generalisations in learning languages is evidence of the systematisation of the language that the child is acquiring. This form of learner language, used by children, is called 'interlanguage'. It is neither indicative of an impoverished version of language filled with errors, nor is it a language purely based on errors due to the first language interference. It is a language, governed by systematic rules and has a life of its own. This establishes the fluid nature of language.

The fluidity in the linguistic behaviour of the child also proves that she does not imitate. The fact that the child is able to come up with utterances that people around her have never used indicates that, in addition to the exposure from her immediate society, she is born with an innate language faculty that governs the learning and use of her language. This faculty of language has a mental or universal grammar inbuilt in it. 'It tries to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions that a system must meet to qualify as a potential human language...and thus constitute the innate organization that determines what counts as linguistic experience and what knowledge of language arises on the basis of this experience'.(Chomsky, 2006). Our ability to internalise and detect the patterns of language is contingent on the universal grammar. According to the theory of universal grammar, language is the knowledge in human mind. It postulates that the ability to learn languages is innate and hardwired into the brain. From this, it can be said that language, defined as multilinguality, is a consequence of universal grammar and also a phenomenon internal to us. However, this is just one end of the spectrum of multilinguality. On the other end, it is an external phenomenon embedded in society.

⁶'What is your name?' The question word 'enna' comes at the end of the sentence.

Multilinguality—A Social Phenomenon

In the following section, we will explain the idea of multilinguality as a social phenomenon. We will begin by briefly analysing response of a student who talks about her morning breakfast.

*Naa school varumbo chaya kudichu. Two idly kazhichu. Illa. One idly kazhichu, one idly baaki vechu... en kittayum sticker undalo chechi. Kaanano? Ibada ba.*⁷

The intermixing of Tamil and Malayalam sentences by the girl is an exhibition of inter-sentential code-switching.⁸ On the surface, the sentence appears to be mixing Tamil, Malayalam and English words. However, analysis with regard to loan words reveals that Malayalam has adopted words from various foreign languages. This sentence from this girl consists of an Arabic word ‘*baaki*’, a Hebrew word ‘*ba*’, a Portuguese word ‘*chaya*’ and the English words ‘one’, ‘two’ and ‘sticker’. This brings to the fore the absorptive and elastic nature of language in the society by which they constantly borrow and mix with each other. Another example, ‘sir is coming slowly slowly’, serves to indicate the fluid nature of language. Here, English, an Indo-European language, accommodates reduplication,⁹ which is an aerial feature of South Asian languages. Emeneau (1956) observed that languages belonging to different language families in India shared numerous features that were not derived from a common source, but were areal features, a product of fusion from constant contact. Fluidity among languages within a geographical area results in a process of structural convergence of languages, creating a linguistic area. For example, retroflex sounds, a typical feature of Dravidian languages permeated Sanskrit and via Sanskrit, influenced other languages. India is a wonderful example as a linguistic area, showcasing mixing, switching, convergence, and sharing of several features of multiple languages at various levels of sounds (phonology), words (morphology), meaning (semantics), and sentences (syntax). The porousness exhibited by languages characterises and defines multilinguality as a societal phenomenon. Multilinguality thus implies that there are no boundaries between languages.

On Beliefs, Biases and Stereotypes

This section will briefly present the observations and analysis of the assumptions of teachers on the various aspects of language learning collected through classroom observations and a survey conducted with teachers. This will help us understand how multilinguality is perceived in schools.

⁷I had tea while coming to school. Had two idly...No....Had one idly, did not have the other idly.... I also have stickers, sister. Do you want to see them? Come here’.

⁸The alternation between two languages, where the switching occurs within a sentence.

⁹Reduplication is a morphological process in which the root or stem of a word or even the whole word is repeated.

An Early Start: The Ideal Condition

As Agnihotri (2009) mentions, ‘a major hurdle in promoting multilinguality and equity is the set of stereotypes shared almost without exception across policymakers, academia, parents, educationists, teacher trainers and teachers’. A few such linguistic stereotypes and misconceptions are a) Sanskrit is the mother of all languages of the world b) Dialects like Braj, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili are an impure and inferior version of the standard language Hindi c) Hindi is the national language of India, etc. This was critically evident in our findings in Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) too. A commonly held view on learning of language(s) among the KV teachers is an apparent correlation between early start and proficiency. Students in KVs are taught English and Hindi from lower primary grades. According to the teachers, it gives them an advantage in those languages over students from other schools, where English teaching starts only at the upper primary level. This belief is supported by the highly contested Critical Period Hypothesis, which states that there is an ideal age to acquire language, usually until 12-15 years beyond which language learning becomes strenuous. This view completely ignores the Input Hypothesis, which states that the success of second language acquisition is based on the quality and contextualised second language learning experience (Krashen, 1982). The assumption that an early start is the most important facet of language learning is to be treated as dicey, as it could result in the neglect of other important aspects in language learning. This belief, if clubbed with the notion that first language(s) of the child hinders the learning of English can lead to the isolation of children’s mother tongue in schools from a very early age.

The Obstacle Called Mother Tongue

The language of instruction is considered to be one of the most important aspects which impact children’s opportunity and ability to learn in schools. In a UNESCO study, we find that ‘the choice of the language ... is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education ... Speakers of mother tongues, which are not the same as the national or local language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system ...’ (UNESCO, 2003, p. 14). Pflapsen (2011) finds it unfortunate that ‘the use of mother tongue or familiar languages in the education system is considered a political or national issue; a problem too complicated to tackle within the scope of a project; or overlooked due to a lack of understanding of the central role that language plays in facilitating access to schooling and academic achievement’. To analyse the teacher’s perceptions on language learning and use, a set of questions concerning the role of mother tongue in learning of second language(s) and its influence on the overall class performance of the child were included in the questionnaire.

Sixty-two percent of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire felt that the use of mother tongue should not be encouraged in classrooms. On questioning whether they believe that students who have a strong foundation in their mother tongue will be able to learn English faster, 50% of the teachers either strongly/partially disagreed. Classroom observations showed that students were discouraged from speaking in their mother tongue or the language of their choice. This stems from the belief that the first language(s)/ mother tongue of the students is an obstacle in learning another language, which contravenes the Transfer Hypothesis according to which speakers apply knowledge/linguistic features learnt from one language to another language. Therefore, the concepts learnt from the mother tongue/first language(s) of the child can easily be transferred and used in the learning and use of English. Hence child's mother tongue, as perceived by the teachers need not necessarily hinder, rather facilitate the second language (English, in this case) learning process. About 57% teachers felt that the use of the mother tongue of the child in the classroom negatively affect the learning and development of English language skills. Condemnatory of the first language of the child as the main source of errors made in the students' use of English, the teachers maintained that frequent use of English without the interference of mother tongue was fundamental in learning and using it efficiently. This comes from the belief that maximum exposure to the target language is essential for better performance in that language. With regard to this, a teacher remarked:

The more you hear and use a language, it would be easier to understand and speak the language. Therefore, it becomes important that students use English and reduce the use of their mother tongue.

About 79% of teachers were of the opinion that to achieve better proficiency in English, the language has to be taught in isolation, side-lining the native tongue of the child. In upholding this belief, the quality of input and the role of first language in the learning and use of second languages are ignored. However, teachers also admit that during a few rare occasions when they have used the mother tongue(s) in explaining difficult words or concepts, students become attentive and grasp concepts better. Almost similar number, 72% of the respondents (teachers) believe that learning through mother tongue help students understand the subject content or concepts better than when they learn in English. With regard to this, a teacher remarked,

Yes, I agree that children understand the concepts better (particularly in maths and EVS) when explained to them in their mother tongue. But quite often we are helpless. This is an English medium central school. We can't keep using their mother tongue(s) or the local languages for explaining concepts. We strictly avoid using Tamil/local languages in the classroom. Only then will the students get used to English and become fluent speakers of the language.

Monolingualism—A Misconception

During the field study, it was observed that linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, the very thing that many teachers proudly hold up as distinguishing factors of Kendriya Vidyalaya, are actively discouraged in the process of classroom learning.

According to 56% of the teachers, linguistic heterogeneity is an obstacle in the smooth functioning of the class. Multilingualism in the classroom is a problem with no other solution than the students adopting the dominant language and culture of the school. The students who fail to do so will fall behind in their academics and eventually face the possibility of being rejected by the system. A teacher commented:

This is a central school. We are not allowed to use Tamil/other regional languages in the classroom. I use Tamil occasionally to introduce jargon. Moreover, students and teachers come from various linguistic backgrounds. In this case, English can be the only medium of instruction. How many languages can the system support even if it wants to?

Teachers believe that monolingualism, with a major dominant language, is the ideal or the only path for effectiveness and efficiency in teaching and learning.

On the question of whether the non-KV students should learn regional language(s) as a subject in their schools, 73% responded in positive and 19% were against the idea. However, when asked if regional languages should be taught as a subject in KV schools, 66% teachers responded in positive gain.

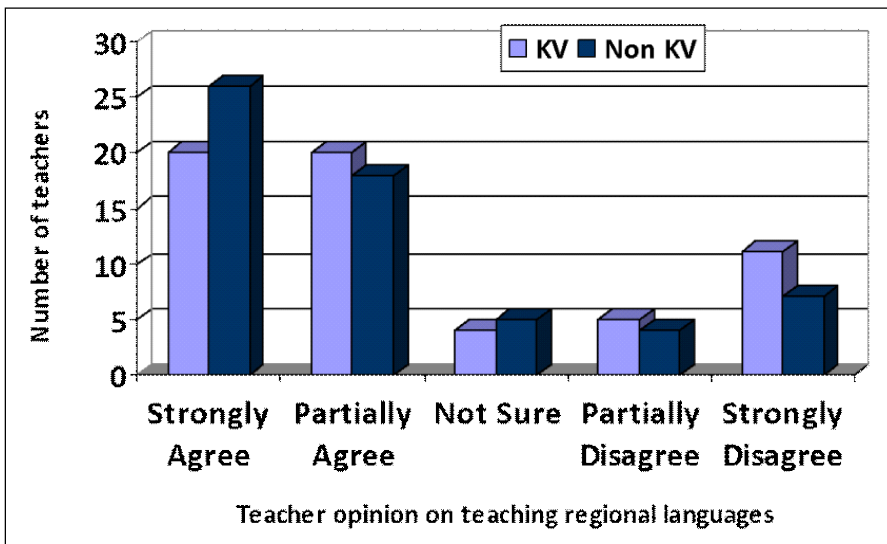


Figure 2: Teacher Opinion on Teaching Regional Languages in KV and Non-KV Schools

A teacher commented:

Children should learn the regional languages. They should learn Tamil if they want to settle in Tamil Nadu or Malayalam if they are in Kerala. Otherwise it becomes difficult...you can still manage with English. But knowing the regional language is an added advantage.

Nearly 27 % of the teachers strongly felt that regional languages should not be included in the KV curriculum. Some of the teachers found the linguistic heterogeneity of students as the prime reason why teaching of regional languages becomes impossible in KVs:

Kendriya Vidyalaya, unlike other schools, has students from all parts of the country. Most of them are wards of transferable employees of the central government, who keep moving throughout the country, studying in various KV's in different states. In such circumstances, how many languages should students learn? Learning regional languages becomes absurd and meaningless in such cases.

There was a section of teachers who believed that, even if regional language teaching is feasible, Kendriya Vidyalaya should not offer regional languages as a subject of study. A teacher says:

Regional languages should not be taught in KV's. This is the era of globalisation. English is the dominant language now. The outside world awaiting every kid is fiercely competitive. Without English...you are out of the race. The school should not waste time teaching regional languages that will be of no or little use to the students.

The comments and opinions put forward by the teachers indicate an essentially instrumental view of language. Here, language functions as a tool to achieve specific purposes. Working through an instrumental view of language, the school compares potential candidate languages and draw a conclusion on which one is ideally suited for achieving their goals. In KV schools, English is given utmost importance, followed by Hindi, as English is widely considered to be the best language option for ensuring success for students, in academics and beyond. The study of language shows that all languages are equal and therefore questions the perceived supremacy of one language over others and demands for an enquiry into examining language in its whole context- its use in various domains, in society, in the formation of one's identity, before coming to attitudinal judgements.

This belief is further cemented with the stereotype that a language is different from a dialect and only standardised languages like English and Hindi are appropriate for education. It was observed that dialects and varieties of all major language(s) were ignored in the classroom. On interacting with the teachers, it was revealed that most of

them were not aware of the linguistic background of the students. Some of the first languages of the students such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Konkani, Tulu, etc. were virtually unknown to them. Some teachers were sympathetic towards language differences and expressed their concern that it is unfortunate. On the first day of the new academic year, a lecture given by the principal to the parents of students of the first grade was refreshing in its outlook towards linguistic and cognitive differences:

... your child might have gone to pre kg, lkg and ukg classes. They might know to read, write and speak English effortlessly. But there are students in the class who have not had the privilege to go to preprimary classes. Once the classes begin, your child might approach you and tell you Mother/Father, the boy who sits next to me in class doesn't know to write the English letters. Please don't ask him to not sit beside his illiterate friend. What you can tell him is to teach his friend what he knows. Parents often approach us requesting if their children can be made to sit with the studious and 'good' children in the class. Let us not follow any kind of discrimination in our school.

Another section of teachers is of the opinion that the standard of KV has been deteriorating with the provision of RTE that reserves seats for economically weaker section who are mostly the first-generation learners of the nearby localities. Voicing her sentiment, a teacher says

Most of the students in this class are smart. They come from educated families. They do their homework regularly and speak English well. However, with the new rule, there are a few students from the lower class. They don't do their homework, they don't speak English and they don't learn English from their classmates but are very good at teaching their local languages to the studious children and spoiling them.

This attitude is better understood if read in conjunction with Claire Kramsch's proposition, that laws, rules and regularities generated by people in everyday life are what distinguishes cultural meaningfulness from cultural randomness as they allow people to acquire a moral rigidity that engender stereotypes. Here, one's own ways of thinking and speaking and behaving seem 'natural' while that of others come across as 'unnatural'. (Kramsch, 1995)

The question to be deliberated over at this juncture is if languages can ever be good or bad, right and wrong. Will the learning of language(s) ever 'spoil' the students? Such notions are guided by one's judgement and stereotypes built around culture or language. Certain languages, in this case, English, are looked with a sense of awe and respect, whereas all other languages/dialects are stigmatised as inferior varieties.

In Rejecting the Multilinguality of Children

Of the many variations that a classroom population exhibits such as region, religion, caste, class and language, linguistic diversity has by far the most far-reaching pedagogical implications. Language inclusion and exclusion have severe impact on the students. A teacher talks about one particular student:

If I remember correctly, his name was Hari. Ten years ago, Hari was my student in 2nd standard. He was very restless and disobedient in class. He used to fail in all the subjects. I was asked to take remedial classes for him often. During once such class, I happened to talk to him in his mother tongue, Tamil. That was the first time I saw him respond. Only then, did I realise that the boy had issues with English. Later, when I explained mathematical concepts to him in Tamil, I was shocked and surprised to see him solve problems in seconds. He was very sharp and quick at grasping concepts and applying them to solve problems in Maths. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was sharper than any of his classmates. However, when communicated to the boy in English, he would either not pay attention or would not respond. Other teachers kept complaining. He had to drop out within a year as he continued to fail in all the classes. Poor boy..... But what can we teachers do? How long can I teach him in Tamil? Should I take care of this one boy at the expense of the rest of the class? There might be students from other linguistic backgrounds who face issues with language. Can we explain things to them in all their languages?

The obsession for standardised or formal language practises was very apparent during the classroom observations. During the pilot study, in the new academic year, it was noticed that the students in the first grade were mostly silent in the initial month of their classes. The friendships that were formed at this stage of school were mostly along linguistic lines. Whenever they were required to speak in class, only those who were fluent in the dominant school language (English) would use it for communicating, while the rest remained silent. However, it was also noticed that teachers of the first grade, started to object to the use of the mother tongue after a month of school. Many a time, students were warned against using broken sentences in English. On occasion, teachers were found berating students for wrong usage of the language. The consequences of such attitudes can result in severe emotional and psychological damage to the students.

As Tollefson and Tsui (2004, p. 17) have argued, the use of a foreign language as a medium of education 'hampers not only academic achievement and growth but also their self-perception, self-esteem, emotional security and also their ability to participate meaningfully in the educational process'. This is corroborated by our experience with first-grade students in the first month of their schooling through an informal talk. On inquiring about their mother tongue, most of the students as an immediate response

replied 'English'. However, their friends would intervene at this point, calling out on the respondents saying 'Liar... You don't speak English at home... You speak only Tamil ...'. This mindset needs to be understood in terms of the experiences that the child has undergone within one month of her schooling which makes her feel that her home language is inferior to English, the language valued by the school.

As the process of learning, using and retaining languages are very much dependent on the exposure from the surroundings, limiting the use of familiar languages of children in school can lead to language loss. In failing to receive ample inputs, language can easily be lost. A student reports:

Before coming to Chennai, my father worked in Bangalore. I have lived in Bangalore for four years. So, I speak Kannada. But now I am forgetting Kannada because no one speaks it here.

This brings to fore the need for exposure to the language for its learning and use. On a side note, KVS, by way of neglecting and ostracising regional languages, limits the students' exposure. This, at a later stage, develops as an inferior feeling that the child attaches to one's regional language/ mother tongue.

In order to gauge the proficiency in their mother tongues, the non-Hindi-speaking students¹⁰ of first, second and third grades were interviewed. It was observed that 71% of the non-Hindi speakers interviewed from grade one has basic literacy in their mother tongue, which falls down to 52% in grade two. This is further reduced to 40% by the time they reach grade three.

The evidence shows that languages of children are fragile and hence with little or no exposure, languages can be lost. Contrary to what it claims, the school goes against the constructionist framework in not building on the already existing language base and knowledge of the child.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In the first part of our study, it emerged that children start schooling already equipped with multilingual abilities. The true nature of language that students use is multilinguality, a phenomenon both internal and external to human mind. The multilinguality used by students within and outside of classrooms is characterised by fluidity, flexibility and hybridity. The fluidity and flexibility of multilinguality is responsible for students' quick grasp of languages. Language, hence, can be redefined as multilinguality.

¹⁰KV offers Hindi as a subject of study. Hence native Hindi speakers were excluded from this semi structured interview.

The second part of our study examined the teacher perceptions on multilinguality and use of language. Most of the teachers do understand that learning is easier when the mother tongue is incorporated while teaching and the usage of mother tongue for instruction will help students understand concepts better. Even the newly-appointed teachers are quick to perceive that students are generally more attentive when they hear their language being used while teaching. This tells us about the indispensable role of mother tongue in learning.

However, the study found that a majority of the teachers are guided by a set of understanding about language learning and use that does not follow from its nature and structure. They oppose the idea of students' using the first language(s) in learning a second language. They believe that L1 has a negative correlation with learning English. At the same time, a large number of teachers believe that regional languages should be taught in schools. One of the prominent reasons for why they argue against the inclusion of regional languages is the practical difficulties faced by people not versed in the local languages. However, lack of technical information on language portrays a tendency to see language as an instrument, as a means to an end. The teachers and school authorities only see language in its specific limited utility as a tool to communicate or ensure success in global stage thereby ignoring its role in shaping the child. Some of the teachers disagree with the idea of accommodating regional and vernacular languages in classroom space. They believe that to survive and flourish in modern hyper-competitive, globalised world, English education is necessary. Everything that stands in the way of learning English, including the learning of regional languages should not be supported by the school and the government. When teachers ask how many out of the 22 or 25 languages of the country should be included in the syllabus for classroom transactions, the question that emerges is whether they are not aware of the existence of about 1600 plus languages in the country. And, if they are, do they only consider the languages mentioned in the eighth schedule of the Constitution of India as languages worthy of being defined as languages? It also implies that teachers consider cultural diversity and linguistic heterogeneity, obstacles to the smooth functioning of classrooms. This is also explicit from the classroom observations made during our study which has led us to conclude that contrary to their claim on the use of constructionist framework, schools fail to build on the existing knowledge of language that children possess.

It is important to re-conceptualise language as multilinguality and understands its interface with education. A multilingual approach towards teaching and learning is essential in schools. This approach welcomes the languages of the neighbourhood into the classrooms and thereby affirms the identity and culture of the child. Like most teachers believe, multilingual approach doesn't necessarily require them to learn all the home language(s)

of the students to make classroom transactions. Telling a child not to use home language at school is indirectly telling the child that her language is inferior to the language that the school values. It can destroy the confidence and creativity of the child. Accepting the mother tongue of children and saying 'you can use own language in the classroom' can make a huge difference.

Teachers, being major players in the classroom have powerful impact on students. Their beliefs, opinions, views and attitudes affect and influence students. A lot of linguistic stereotypes and biases are outcome of ignorance. Hence, it is important for teachers to undergo focussed and structured awareness on the nature, structure, acquisition, learning and functions of language. It will be helpful for teachers to know the linguistic profiles of their students and try to base classroom transactions and activities grounded in local culture and practices and thereby make classrooms more inclusive. It leads to democratic classrooms and brings harmony in education.

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APPENDIX-A

- Q1. English language teaching and learning becomes difficult in classrooms where the students have different mother tongues.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q2. English should be taught through English for better communication.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q3. Use of mother tongue in classrooms negatively affects proficiency in English or a second language.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q4. Students' use of the mother tongue(s) should be encouraged in classroom.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q5. If you think the mother tongue should be used, when do you think the use of mother tongue is appropriate in an English class?
a) To introduce new and complicated words
b) To make students feel more comfortable and confident
c) To explain difficult grammatical concepts.
d) To give instructions
e) Any Other
b) If you have encouraged the use of mother tongue, has there been a positive response from the students'?
a) Yes
b) No
- Q6. Learning through mother tongue help students perform better than when they learn in English.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q7. If students are not proficient in English, the student should be taught through their mother tongue
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q8. Students who can read and write in their mother tongue will be able to learn a second language faster compared to students who cannot read or write in their first language.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q9. Children should learn mother tongue or regional language in schools.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
- Q10. Children should learn the first language or the regional language in KV.
1. Strongly agree 2. Partially agree 3. Not sure 4. Partially disagree 5. Strongly disagree
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