

Research Article

Multilingualism in a Montessori Preschool: A Study of Language Variability in a Linguistically Diverse Preschool Programme

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a study of an 'English-medium' preschool programme for underprivileged children. The diverse linguistic backgrounds of the teachers and students prompted an enquiry into how multiple languages would be negotiated in the setting and how comprehension, learning and communication would occur given that none of the children came from English-speaking homes. The article identifies and interprets key features of verbal language that were observed in the setting and articulates implications for educational practice.

Keywords: Multilinguality, Montessori, Language Variability

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how the phenomenon of multilinguality manifests amongst the small group of teachers and learners in a preschool programme called 'Bridging the Gap' (BTG). BTG is a free preschool programme for underprivileged provided by a private, English-medium Montessori school in Mumbai. One of the primary goals of the programme is to help the children to develop English language skills. I was curious about how language interactions would occur given that none of the children came from English-speaking homes. The teachers too, though all fluent in English had varied linguistic backgrounds. Given this context, how would comprehension, learning and communication take place? What languages would be used by whom, and for what purposes? More importantly, what do the language interactions tell us about children's experience of learning? To address these questions, I undertook an observational study of the environment, documenting language interactions between teachers and students

over a 2-week period. This article highlights the features of language use and variability of language observed in the setting and attempts to interpret the findings in relation to the concepts of language variability, sociocultural factors affecting speech, and language acquisition.

LANGUAGE, MULTILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION

Primary education is to a great extent language education
(*NCERT 2005, Position Paper on Teaching of Indian Languages, p. 15*).

Language is central to the process of education, particularly for young children who are simultaneously learning language and learning about the physical and social world. As well as being a medium of communication, language plays other significant roles in human life. For one, it is through language that children conceptualise the world, learning to label, categorise and reflect on their experiences. Languages are acquired and used within social contexts so they become an essential aspect of one's personal history and cultural identity.

Linguistic diversity and multilingual ability are recognised features of Indian society. In fact, language variability or multilingualism is inherent to all human speech, both within and amongst the many varieties, dialects and languages that exist. As highlighted by Agnihotri (2009) '... multilinguality and variability are constitutive of human existence', noting that speakers move fluidly between the varieties of their linguistic repertoire to suit the context, audience and demands of the situation. When children acquire languages from the adults and peers in their environment, they not only learn sounds, words and syntax, they learn the essential skills of varying their speech in socially acceptable and appropriate ways and gain metalinguistic awareness which enables more sophisticated use and interpretation of language.

The National Curriculum Framework of India (NCF 2005) recommends school instruction in the child's home language whenever possible, particularly at the early stages of schooling. This position is supported by research which shows children learn best in their home language. However, there is an increasing demand for 'English-medium' education as parents associate knowledge of English with better educational and employment opportunities for their children's futures.

Recognising both the aspirations and social realities regarding language learning, the NCF (2005) suggests that multilinguality ought to be embraced and used as an educational resource in classrooms:

Multilingualism, which is constitutive of the identity of a child and a typical feature of the Indian linguistic landscape, must be used as a resource, classroom

strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher. This is not only the best use of a resource readily available, but also a way of ensuring that every child feels secure and accepted, and that no one is left behind on account of his/her linguistic background. (NCF 2005, p. 36)

The benefits of this approach have been evidenced by research which shows that multilingual ability correlates positively with academic achievement, cognitive flexibility and social tolerance (NCF 2005, Executive Summary).

Despite the views expressed in the NCF (2005), the ground reality is that variability in language is often perceived negatively in educational settings. Schools tend to promote a monolingual culture and children who come to school not speaking the language of instruction are disadvantaged. These children often experience a lack of comprehension and anxiety when required to speak in class. This creates a cognitive burden which not only affects progress in language topics but across academic disciplines. Furthermore, teachers miss an opportunity to make school learning more engaging and meaningful to all children by drawing on their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

The work of American linguist, William Labov (1969) provides important lessons for understanding how children speaking varieties of language other than the 'standard' language are impacted in a school environment. Labov challenged the 'cultural and linguistic deprivation theory' studies of the 1960s which dominated academic and policy discourse to account for the educational failure of many poor and working class Black African American (BAA) children from urban ghettos. He contested the 'evidence' on which claims of the limited verbal capacity of BAA children were based, because the interviews failed to create the conditions in which natural speech would occur. Labov pointed out that a BAA child will not naturally display his or her language competency in an unfamiliar, formal interview setting, being asked de-contextualised questions by a large, white, unknown male no matter how friendly the interviewer was trying to be. Such interviews clearly did not take account of the sociocultural factors which affect verbal expression.

Furthermore, the limited speech of BAA children which was captured, was regarded as incorrect, unintelligent or lazy rather than as a legitimate variety of non-standard English with a logical, systematic structure and a rich expressive capacity. BAA children's 'lack of language', which was attributed to inadequate verbal and cultural stimulation in their home environments, used white middle-class cultural and linguistic patterns as the benchmark. This argument ignored both the reality of a highly verbal culture amongst BAA communities and displayed ignorance of the contemporary Chomskyan theories of language acquisition which revealed that all children have a generative capacity to acquire grammatically correct language, despite incomplete and limited language input.

Labov's study drew attention to the institutional perceptions held about children on the basis of their speech. Not speaking the standard language of the school—typically a variety of speech aligned with elite or powerful social groups—was interpreted as lack of verbal competency. It is precisely such interpretations which foster attitudes of social stigma towards speakers and communities using non-standard language forms. The implications for education are significant when we know that what a teacher thinks about a child is an important factor in his or her success or failure (Rosenthal's self-fulfilling prophecy theory as referred to in Labov (1969, p. 207). Whether a teacher hears a pupil speak a non-standard variety through the 'through the bias of verbal deprivation theory' (p. 207) or just as a naturally acquired dialect which is equally valid, systematic and rule-bound, is likely to influence his or her attitudes and responses to the child.

This study seeks to contribute an understanding of how speakers of different language varieties experience the school environment. By observing how the small group of teachers and learners in the BTG programme negotiate their verbal repertoire to understand and be understood by others, the study hopes to shed light on universal features of multilingualism to inform wider educational practices.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The central question which the study seeks to address is:

- What features of multilinguality are observed amongst teachers and children in the BTG programme and; how can they be interpreted in light of their educational and social significance?

A number of subsidiary questions were also reflected on:

- What varieties of language are used, and for what purposes?
- How do children and teachers respond to different varieties of language?
- How does the data inform our understanding of language learning and other conceptual learning?
- What are the gaps between comprehension and production across language varieties used in the classroom?

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The Setting

BTG is a preschool programme for underprivileged children, which run as a charitable initiative of an elite, private, Montessori school. The programme is funded by the school

owner and by contributions from fee-paying parents. The school is located in an economically, linguistically and culturally diverse suburb of Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra. The aim of the programme is to provide a strong educational foundation for future schooling by providing high-quality English education using the Montessori method. One of the school's two classroom environments is dedicated for the BTG programme each afternoon. The language of instruction in the BTG programme is intended to be English, however, as the students come from non-English-speaking homes, teachers often speak to the children in vernacular languages to help them settle into the environment and to enable them to understand what is being said in English.

Montessori Approach

The school follows the Montessori curriculum and pedagogical method developed by Italian physician and educationist, Maria Montessori (1870–1952). Montessori believed in the innate desire and capacity of children to learn. She regarded development as a natural process, which requires a supportive environment in which children can satisfy their inner urge to develop physical and mental skills. Schools following the Montessori approach encourage children to choose their own (age-appropriate) activities from open shelves. Activities involve working with hands-on materials, of increasing complexity, in the areas of practical life, language, mathematics and sensory development. Children work independently or in small groups while the teachers act as facilitators or guides. The classrooms have a mixed-aged group (ages 2–6 years) to allow younger children to learn from the behaviour and skills modelled by older children and to give older children the opportunity to nurture and lead their younger classmates.

Classroom Routine

Children are dropped off by their guardians at 12:30 pm and are picked up at 3:30 pm. New children stay for a shorter duration, which is extended gradually until the child has settled into the environment.

Children are able to choose from the shelves, any activity which has been demonstrated to them by a teacher. Having chosen their activity, they place their work on a mat or table, and repeat the activity as many times as they want, after which they are expected to put it back in its original place. The classroom ethos values quiet concentrated work by the children so noise levels in the classroom are expected to be kept low.

At 2:30 pm, the children are given a snack and then are allowed to play in the outdoor area or continue to work indoors. Towards the end of the session, circle time is conducted. Teachers use circle time for singing, explaining classroom rules and recapping themes which have been covered earlier.

Participants

At the time of the study, there were nine children enrolled in the programme and three teachers assigned to the class. The study commenced at the start of the academic year when many of the children were new to the school.

Table 1 and 2 provide an overview of the participants of the programme (pseudonyms have been used). Information about children's linguistic background is recorded by teachers at the time of admission. Teachers linguistic background is self-reported.

Table 1: Profiles of Children in the BTG Programme

Name	Age (years)	Languages spoken (home language/s listed in bold type)	Length of time in BTG at start of observation period
Fahad	3	Hindi	New child
Fahim	5	Hindi	New child
Krish ¹	4	Gujarati and Hindi	3 months
Mohsin	2.5	Hindi	New child
Paresh	4	Gujarati and Hindi	New child
Pari ²	10	Hindi	2 weeks
Prem	2.5	Marathi and Hindi	1 month
Rohit ¹	3.5	Tamil and Hindi	8 months
Saana	3	Marathi and Hindi	1 month

¹Krish and Rohit had joined part way through the previous academic session. The duration noted excludes a 6 week break for Summer holidays.

²Pari is in the care of a guardian who does not know her exact date of birth. Based on her physical appearance teachers have estimated that she is approximately 10 years old. Pari is from the village of Bhaganpur in Uttar Pradesh. Her guardian brought her to Mumbai as her parents were not in a position to care for her. The guardian reports that she has not been able to secure alternative school admission elsewhere due to Pari's lack of documentation.

Table 2: Profiles of Teachers in the BTG Programme

Name	Designation	Languages spoken (home language/s listed in bold type)	Length of service in BTG at start of observation period
Miss Meera	Montessori Directress	Gujarati , Hindi, English	1 month
Miss Poonam	Assistant Teacher	Marathi , Hindi, English	1 year
Miss Tina	Montessori Directress	English , Hindi, Marathi, Konkani	2 years

Data Collection and Documentation

Data for the study are based on interviews with the school founder and teachers, and 10 days of classroom observation. I primarily adopted the role of a silent observer in the classroom to observe natural patterns of speech in the classroom. Classroom interactions were recorded by noting:

- the speaker;
- what they said (in the language spoken where possible)
- who they were speaking to
- what they were doing at the time

As the participants became accustomed to my presence, they began to interact with me by asking questions or including me in their conversations, and I would respond accordingly. At times, I would also ask questions to a child or teacher, to gain further information or clarify what had been said. Notes were translated into English and transcribed to compile an extensive observational journal.

FINDINGS

An analysis of the extensive, rich data set, the following major themes were identified:

- a. Who is saying what, to whom and how?
- b. How do participants make meaning?
- c. What factors affect the production of children’s speech?
- d. What do we learn about language development?

The next section elaborates on the themes with supporting evidence.

Who Is Saying What, to Whom and How?

Frequency of Interactions

The most striking feature of verbal behaviour in the classroom was the predominance of teacher speech over language spoken by children. The following diagram shows the type of interaction in order to frequency.

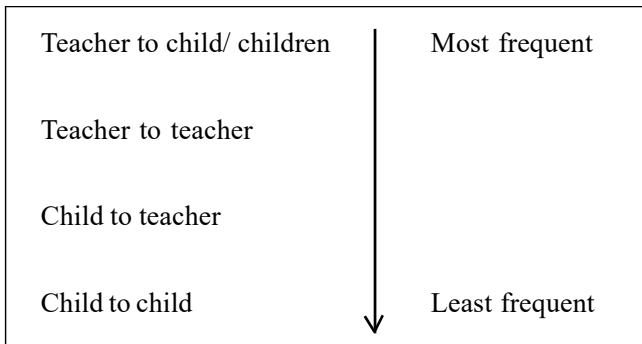


Figure 1: Type of Verbal Interaction in Order of Frequency

Child to teacher speech was typically a response to an interaction initiated by the teacher. For example,

Fahad is putting coloured beads on a rod. He puts on a yellow bead.

Miss Tina says 'what colour? ... yellow'

Fahad says 'yellow'.

Fahad puts on a red bead.

Miss Tina says 'ye kaun sa colour hai?' (*which colour is this?*)

Fahad says 'blue'.

Miss Tina says 'red'.

As shown in the example, teachers tended to ask the children closed questions, and accordingly the children would respond using one-word utterances. The majority of children's communication took the form of non-verbal gestures such as nodding or pointing. There were very few instances of child to child speech, and when they did occur, speech was generally inaudible and took place when teachers were out of sight.

Purpose of Language

Teacher to child speech, the most frequently observed type of interaction, fulfilled a variety of purposes. Teachers spoke to children to give instructions, clarify a child's needs or wishes, name objects, establish appropriate behaviour and build rapport (Table 3).

Teachers spoke to other teachers to plan tasks, discuss classroom activities and comment on the children's work or behaviour.

Children's speech was largely limited to answering closed questions from teachers, for example,

Miss P says 'Is ko kya bolta hai?' (*What is this called*) pointing to a cow.

Rohit says 'cow'.

repeating words, for example:

Miss Tina says 'this is a monkey'. Krish says 'monkey'

or expressing a need or wish, for example:

Mohsin points to the door and says 'ammi' (*mummy*), 'dadu' (*grandfather*). #

Code-Mixing and Code-Switching as the Norm

The majority of teacher speech was in Hindi. Hindi was the home language of half of the children in the class but it was also regarded as a mediating language which children

Table 3: Purpose and Examples of Teacher to Child Speech

Purpose of language	Example
Instruction	Miss Poonam says to Prem, ‘sticking karo’ (<i>do sticking</i>). ‘We will do sticking. Bring plastic mat’. Prem brings a plastic mat. Miss Poonam says ‘rakho niche abhi’ (<i>now put it down</i>). Prem puts the plastic mat down. Miss Poonam says ‘paper, le lo box se’ (<i>take paper from the box</i>) ‘come take paper’.
Clarifying needs or wishes	Miss Meera asks Pari ‘Now what? Needlework karna hai?’ (<i>do you want to do needlework?</i>). Pari looks confused. Miss Meera makes gestures with her hands to demonstrate sewing and says, ‘ap ne kiya tha... suwee aur daga sai’ (<i>you had done it...with a needle and thread</i>). Pari shrugs. Miss Meera asks, ‘Do you want to read another book? Library corner mai hai sab book’ (<i>All of the books are in the library corner</i>).
Naming objects	Miss Meera shows the children a model of a cow and says ‘cow...Hindi mai kya kehte?... Gai’ (<i>what do we say in Hindi?...gai</i>)
Establishing appropriate classroom conduct and ‘polite’ verbal behaviour	Miss Meera explains rules of moving around the classroom. She speaks in Hindi asking everyone to listen. ‘Agar hum chalenge, ek dusra ko ham dhakha marte hai? Nahin!’ (<i>if we are walking, we bump into each other? no!</i>). ‘Everyone listen. If someone is in our way... kya bolenge?’ (<i>what do we say?</i>) Excuse me!’ Children repeat ‘Excuse me!’.
Rapport building	Miss Poonam sees that Prem has nail polish on his finger and toe nails. Miss Poonam asks ‘nail paint kisne lagaya?’ (<i>who put on the nail paint?</i>). Miss Poonam takes Prem in her lap and cuddles him. She continues to speak to him softly in Marathi—asking him who painted his nails.

from other vernacular backgrounds would be familiar with. The school owner explained that although the aim of the programme is to help the children learn English, Hindi is used by teachers to ‘bridge the gap’ between the children’s home language and English.

Teachers’ speech routinely involved code-mixing and code-switching between English and other languages. The following extract demonstrates this feature of teacher speech:

Three-year-old Rohit is struggling to put a puzzle together.

Rohit says something to Miss Poonam (inaudible).

Miss Poonam says to Rohit, ‘Aap ko malum hai kaise karna hai’ (*you know how to do it*). ‘You know how to do it’. **[CODE SWITCHING FROM HINDI TO ENGLISH]**

Miss Poonam points to the puzzle and says ‘is ke upar....aise’ (*above this, like this*)—she gestures to the correct position.

Rohit gives the puzzle piece to Miss Poonam.

Miss Poonam takes the piece and shows Rohit how to position it.

Miss Poonam says ‘put it, aise’ (*like this*) ‘turn maro’ (*Turn it*). [CODE-MIXING USING ENGLISH AND HINDI]

Miss Poonam gives the piece to Rohit, he fits the pieces and completes the puzzle while Miss Poonam watches.

As this example demonstrates, code-switching typically took the form of an utterance in one language (or code) immediately followed by the same phrase in a second language. Instances of code-switching appear to indicate an intentional use of two codes to ensure understanding and facilitate the learning of English.

Instances of code-mixing such as ‘turn maro’ and ‘put it aise’ reflect typical language by adult speakers, whereby words and phrases of English and Hindi are used together to express meaning. Such conventions of code-mixing have become standardised and are acceptable in everyday speech.

Which Languages Are Used with Whom?

The following table shows the languages used by each teacher in their interactions with each of the children in the programme. The teachers, Miss Tina, Miss Poonam and Miss Meera are represented in the column on the far left. The children are represented by their first initial and age along the top row of the Table 3 (e.g., P2 refers to 2-year-old Prem). The letter in brackets signifies the dominant home language of the person. The table shows all the languages that were observed in verbal exchange between each teacher and each child.

The order of the letters signifies the dominance or frequency of the language in the interactions. For example, Miss Meera spoke in Gujarati more than in English or Hindi

Table 4: Languages Used in Interactions between Teachers and Children

	P2 (M)	M2 (H)	F3 (H)	S3 (M)	R3 (T)	K4 (G)	P4 (G)	F5 (H)	P10 (H)
Miss T (E)	H, E, M	H, E	H, E	H, E, M	E, H	E, H	E, H	E, H	H, E
Miss P (M)	H, E, M	H, E	H, E	H, E, M	H, E	H, E, G	H, E	H, E	H, E
Miss M (G)	H, E	H, E	H, E	H, E, M	H, E	G, E, H	H, E, G	H, E	H, E

English (E)	Hindi (H)	Marathi (M)	Gujarati (G)	Tamil (T)
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with 4-year-old Krish (K4) but used Hindi and English more than Gujarati with 4-year-old Paresh (P4). To provide some context, Krish spent much of his time sitting alone in the library corner and needed significant encouragement to participate in classroom activities. Miss Meera's dominant use of Gujarati with Krish can perhaps be explained as an effort to build a connection with him so that he could be persuaded to engage in other activities.

Table 4 provides an overview of the range of languages accessed by teachers in their interactions with children. It can be observed that teachers use all of their linguistic resources to varying degrees, depending on what the situation warrants. For instance, Miss Tina has some knowledge of Marathi, which she uses in her interactions with 2-year-old Prem (P2) and 3-year-old Saana (S3); although she primarily communicates with them in Hindi and English. The young age of these children and their unfamiliarity with English and, to an extent, Hindi, prompts the teacher to use Marathi when she needs to make a connection with the child.

The programme goal of helping the children learn English is reflected in the efforts that teachers are making to speak in English and repeat Hindi phrases in English. However, the primary determinant of language choice seems to be the social situation in a particular moment, as the teachers move fluidly and often, subconsciously between the codes within their linguistic repertoire.

How Do Participants Make Meaning?

For most of the children, the BTG programme was their first experience of a school environment. Moreover, their home environments provided a different language input to that experienced in school. These factors presented challenges for comprehension between children and teachers. It was evident that meaning was conveyed and interpreted largely on the basis of non-verbal cues rather than by verbal language. These cues included the context, non-verbal communication and recognising patterns of interaction.

Context

Context is an important factor in helping participants makes sense of a situation. The following example shows how a child interprets what the teacher wants, because of the context rather than actual words being spoken:

Fahad takes the clay activity from the shelf. Miss Poonam tells him to take a plastic mat.

Fahad goes over to the mat shelf and holds a plastic mat, he asks Miss P 'ye?' (*this one?*).

She confirms by nodding and says 'aur ek green mat le ke ao' (*and get a green mat*).

Fahad brings both mats.

As there are only plastic mats and green cloth mats on the shelf, Fahad has deduced what the teacher wanted without knowing what was meant by the words 'green mat'.

The following exchange involves the teacher speaking only in English with the child:

Mohsin is wiping water from the floor using a sponge.

Miss Tina says 'good, clean it up ... it's your classroom, keep it clean'.

Miss Tina points to more drops of water and says 'more water here'.

Mohsin wipes the water and holds up the cloth. Miss Tina says 'hang it up' pointing to the hook.

Mohsin hangs up the cloth.

The child understands the intention of the teacher's words 'more water here' because of the context and gestures she uses. The teacher understands that the child's action of holding up the cloth after wiping the floor means he is asking where it should be put away.

Non-Verbal Communication

Gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice were used extensively by teachers and children to understand what was being communicated. The following example shows Miss Poonam trying to guess what Fahad is trying to express:

Fahad brings a basket of puzzles to the mat. He works with a sheep puzzle. He gets up and approaches Miss Poonam, pointing to his puzzle.

Miss Poonam says 'sheep'.

Fahad keeps pointing. Miss Poonam asks him 'kaise join karna?' (*how do we join it?*)

Fahad points again. Miss Poonam says 'mein help karu?' (*shall I help you?*).

Fahad brings his basket over to Miss Poonam.

In this example, both the context, gestures and process of trial and error help Miss Poonam understand that Fahad needs her help to complete the puzzle.

Another non-verbal cue is demonstrated in the following example:

Prem is wandering across the classroom and suddenly begins to play with Saana's work.

Miss P says (in a stern voice) 'that is Saana's work'.

Prem quickly gets up. Prem and Saana say something to each other (inaudible).

Prem's may not have understood the English utterance 'that is Saana's work' but by the tone of the teacher's voice he understood that the teacher was reprimanding his action.

Patterns of Interaction

Children learn not only what is explicitly taught in school but implicit social rules which apply to verbal and social behaviour. Certain patterns of interactions occur repeatedly in the classroom context and children learn to deduce what teachers expect from them in terms of an appropriate response. For example,

Miss M shows a donkey and says 'This is a donkey'. A few of the children say 'donkey' in unison.

Next Miss M shows a rooster and says 'What is this? A rooster'. Some of the children say 'rooster' in unison. Some of the children remain silent.

The children who repeat after the teacher have learnt that this naming exercise requires them to say the word stressed by the teacher. Many of the younger children and those who were newer to the environment did not repeat after the teacher.

Below is another example of a child recognising the pattern of interaction which he is expected to follow:

Miss Tina has a stack of picture cards in pairs which she is showing to Krish. She names the picture on each card (boy, bird, girl, sun, cow, monkey, apple) and passes the card to Krish who matches it to the identical one on the mat.

Miss Tina says to Krish, 'Put the cow back inside'. Krish puts the cow cards in the basket.

Miss Tina says 'Very good ... now put the apple inside'. Krish picks up the cards showing a boy.

Miss Tina says 'I don't want the boy, I want the apple' while looking at the apple. Krish picks up the apple card.

Miss T says 'Can I have the sun?'. Krish gives the sun card.

Miss Tina asks 'Can I have the cat?'. Krish gives the bird card.

Miss Tina says ‘This is a bird. Kaun karte hai ‘meow’?’ (*who does ‘meow’?*). Krish picks up the cat card.

Miss Tina says ‘Can I have the girl?’. Krish gives her the cards showing a boy.

Miss Tina says ‘Not the boy, I want the girl’. Krish gives the girl cards.

In this exchange, the repetitive instruction enables Krish to understand that he is expected to pick up the particular pair of cards requested by the teacher. Sometimes he chooses the correct card, at other times he picks the wrong card, indicating he is guessing but he still understands the basic premise of the exercise.

What Factors Affect the Production of Children’s Speech?

As noted earlier, children’s speech was observed significantly less than teacher speech. Interestingly, one of the teachers conveyed that children in the fee-paying programme were much noisier and more talkative than those in the BTG programme. To explain the low occurrence of BTG children’s talk it can be helpful to refer to the work of Labov (1969) which highlights the impact of sociocultural and affective factors in the production of speech. There are a range of factors which influence the amount children speak, including their age, confidence, and comfort in the environment. I will focus on two factors evidenced through observations: (1) children’s familiarity with the language spoken by teachers and (2) their ability to relate to the knowledge raised in the setting. Both played a role in determining how much the children spoke.

Familiarity with Teacher’s Language

All three teachers used multiple languages in the environment however Miss Poonam, an assistant teacher from a Marathi-speaking household, was observed speaking in Hindi and Marathi more than the other two adults. The younger children, especially the two children from Marathi-speaking backgrounds appeared to be most comfortable when sitting close to her and were most expressive, verbally (in Marathi) and in non-verbal expressions, while in her company. They also sought her assistance if they needed help or were upset. The children knew that Miss Poonam spoke ‘their’ language and this seemed to help build a relationship of trust between them.

Interestingly, the Gujarati-speaking children did not appear to have an equivalent relationship with Miss Meera who is from a Gujarati-speaking home. This suggests there are other mediating factors which contribute to the connection between a child and teacher.

Ability to Relate to Classroom Knowledge

The few instances of extended verbal expression amongst the children occurred when they could personally relate to the activity or discussion taking place. A notable example involves 5-year-old Fahim, who joined the class on the second day of the observation period. I had not heard Fahim speak until the following interaction on Day 7:

Fahim is working with toy animals with Miss Tina. He pulls out a duck from the basket of toy animals.

Fahim says ‘Ye mera nani ka ghar mein bhi hai, doh hai’ (*these are at my grandmother’s house too, there are two*).

Miss Tina says ‘English mein kya bolte hai?’ (*What do they call it in English?*).

Fahim says ‘Duck’.

Miss Tina says ‘Kya khaate hai?’ (*What do they eat?*).

Fahim says ‘Chura khaate hai’ (*They eat rice flakes*).

Fahim holds up the sheep and say ‘Ye goat hai’ (*This is a goat*).

Miss Tina says ‘Ye sheep hai, goat nahi’ (*This is a sheep not a goat*).

Miss Tina goes on to explain in Hindi the differences between a goat and a sheep, pointing to the horns and body.

Fahim says ‘Main ne dekha ... hum log ke pass hai ... bada wala’ (*I have seen one ... we have one ... a big one*).

Miss Tina asks ‘Aap ke pass hai ye parosin ke pass?’ (*Do you have one or do your neighbours have?*).

Fahim says ‘Rasta mein chalte hai’ (*They walk in the street*).

Fahim picks up the toy horse and starts talking about it. He is speaking animatedly in Hindi, talking about his brother riding a horse, falling off and hurting his eye.

During this interaction, Fahim is able to contribute his knowledge (e.g., knowing what ducks eat) and experiences regarding the topic of conversation. His speech moves beyond the one-word utterances typically exhibited by children in the setting, into a rich narrative with detail and expressiveness.

What Do We Learn about Language Development?

According to Ray Jackendoff (1993) in his seminal book, ‘Patterns in the mind, language and human nature’, language ability is a ‘complex mix of learned and innate’ (p. 101).

However, little of childhood language development can be attributed to explicit teaching. Jackendoff notes that children's speech is governed by its own internal grammatical rules, '... imitation is, as it were, filtered through the child's own (unconscious) version of the language' (p. 104). He also adds that comprehension precedes production of language. Children's efforts to comprehend the language input available to them in the classroom perhaps explains the limited occurrence of children's speech.

Stages of Language Development

Between the ages of 2 and 5 years (the age of most of the BTG children), children's speech develops significantly in terms of grammatical complexity and size of vocabulary (Jackendoff 1993). From two-word utterances at the age of two, children acquire speech which more or less follows adult grammatical structure by the age of five. The limited evidence of children's speech is consistent with pattern. Apart from one-word utterances, the speech of 2-year-olds included the following examples:

- 'ho gaya!' (*Done!*)
- 'bag chhaiye' (*I want my bag*).
- 'Mummy kaha hai?' (*Where is my mummy?*)

Speech of the 3-year-old included:

- The teacher shows Rohit and picture of a helicopter and asks him if he has seen one. Rohit says 'ha, me ne dekha ... aeroplane hai'. (*yes, I've seen ... it's an aeroplane*).

Speech of the 5-year-old:

- In response to a conversation about a goat, Fahim says 'main ne dekha ... hum log ke pass hai ... bara wala' (*I have seen one ... we have one ... a big one*).

Distinctions between Languages

The mixed-age setting (most of the children were aged between 2- to 5-years old), and the presence of a much older child, Pari (aged 10 years) provided an opportunity to observe how children's conceptualisation of language differed across varied ages.

One feature was that younger children did not appear to make a mental distinction between languages. For example,

Miss Tina is looking at picture cards with 4-year-old Krish.

While looking at a picture of a cow Miss Tina asks 'English mein 'gai' ko kya bolta hai?' (*what is 'gai' called in English?*).

Krish says 'gai' (*cow*).

Miss Tina says, 'nahi, English mein gai ko 'cow' bolta hai' (*no, in English, gai is called cow*).

This exchange suggests that young children take in language as a whole rather than categorising what they hear into distinct languages.

In contrast, 10-year-old Pari specifically sought the English translations for Hindi words. For example,

Pari takes an insect puzzle to work with. She holds a piece with a butterfly on it and says 'titalee ko English mein kya bolta hai?' (*What is a 'titalee' called in English?*).

I tell her 'butterfly'.

Pari repeats the word 'butterfly'.

Pari knows the Hindi word for a butterfly is 'titalee', but she knows it has a different name in English. She asked me for the English name because she was aware that I am a speaker of English. This shows a level of awareness between distinct languages which was not observed in the younger children.

An interaction with 5-year-old Fahim who knows several English words shows he has not categorised words into distinct languages:

Pointing to a picture of a goat I ask Fahim 'ye kya hai?' (*what is this?*)

Fahim says 'Goat'.

I ask Fahim 'aap ki bhasha mein is ko kya bolte hai?' (*What is it called in your language?*).

Fahim says 'Goat'

I say 'Bakri hai?' (*is it a bakri?—bakri is goat in Hindi*).

Fahim says 'ha, bakri' (*yes, bakri*).

Fahim knew both the Hindi and English words for goat, and he may subconsciously know which word he should use in the classroom context and which word should be used in his neighbourhood context, but he is not yet able to make the connection between the two words explicitly.

What versus Why Questions

Another difference in speech between Pari and the younger children was the nature of questions asked. Questions communicated by younger children, either verbally or by gestures expressed 'what?' type questions. For example,

Miss Poonam comes over to help Mohsin with the insect puzzle.

Mohsin points to a picture of a fly in the puzzle and says ‘ye?’ (*this?*).

Miss Poonam says ‘fly’.

Mohsin tries to fit the piece into the frame.

Miss Poonam says ‘ghuma ke karo’ (*turn it and do*)

Mohsin points to a caterpillar and says ‘kya hai?’ (*what is it?*).

Miss Poonam says ‘caterpillar ... caterpillar’.

Mohsin pulls out the piece and again asks ‘kya hai?’ (*what is it?*)

Miss Poonam says ‘caterpillar’.

Pari was the only child observed to ask a ‘why’ question, as shown in the following example:

Miss Tina is working with Pari and Fahim looking at picture cards of different types of boats—cruise ship, yacht, canoe, sailboat.

Miss Tina says ‘Ye sab pani mein chalte hai, lekin sab ka naam alag hota hai’ (*all of these—pointing to the remaining cards—go in the water but all their names are different*).

Pari says ‘Esai kyu?’ (*Why is that?*). The teacher looks surprised and pauses while she thinks of how to answer.

Miss Tina says ‘Mein ladki hu aur Miss Poonam ladki hai, lekhin sab ladkiyan ka naam alag hota hai ... sab ka naam alag hai.’ (*I am a girl and Miss Poonam is a girl but all girls have different names, everyone’s name is different*). Miss Tina goes on to explain more about different names.

The teacher was taken by surprise at Pari’s question since most of her younger students do not ask questions of this nature.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS FOR THE BTG PROGRAMME AND IMPLICATIONS

The data generated from the study and the findings in this report provide a valuable means of reflecting on how children are ‘experiencing’ language in the setting. When presented with the findings from the study, the school owner was surprised about the prevalence of code-mixing and code-switching by teachers, and perceived it as a negative issue. Such notions of purity of language and monolingualism as an ideal can be challenged by recognising that speech is inherently variable. By paying attention to the way speech naturally occurs, fluidly adapting to the needs of the social situation, teachers can be more accepting of language variability amongst children.

Teachers need to be aware of the process of language development for learners of a second language so that they can set their expectations and develop teaching practices accordingly. For instance, the NCERT Position Paper on the Teaching of English notes that

Research suggests the existence of a ‘silent period’ of about three months in natural second-language learning situations before the learner attempts to produce any language. The input that the learner receives during this period serves as a base for attempts at early production (NCERT 2006, p.6).

The NCERT suggests that the aim of English language instruction at the initial levels should be

... to build familiarity with the language (through primarily spoken or spoken-and written input) in meaningful situations, so that the child builds up a working knowledge of the language. (p. 6).

***Implication:** Teachers should not expect early production of speech but rather provide exposure to language in meaningful contexts and track children’s comprehension and meaning making. Teachers can use a variety of resources to introduce the children to comprehensible input in the target language.*

Ideas about teaching language must be informed by studies of effective practices in second language learning, which are specific to the Indian context. In this approach, home languages are used concurrently with the target language to translate and explain. In most English-medium schools, the home language is viewed as a ‘surreptitious intruder’ (NCERT 2006, p. 12) and is perceived to compromise the opportunity for the children to learn the target language, English.

***Implication:** Teachers can develop strategies for using multiple languages in a more conscious way, for example, by using dual language story books to read to the children in a home language and then in English. This would establish the legitimacy of a multilingual environment and show an acceptance of children’s language identities.*

It should be recognised that all of the children in the programme have achieved communicative competence in their home language by the time they start school. Children’s expressive ability in their home language must be treated as a valuable resource which can transfer to their learning of a second language. It was observed that children revealed their language ability and personal knowledge when they were able to relate to classroom topics and were given the opportunity to speak in their home language.

Implication: *Children in the BTG group must be provided with a supportive environment in which they are encouraged to express themselves in all languages. Providing opportunities for children to share their experiences (e.g., ‘show and tell’) or using prompts which are relevant to their life experiences can support their language development and improve their confidence in the environment. Teachers can be supported with resources to help them understand how to use competence in a home language to build competence in English. TESS-India provides useful resources on their website, <http://www.tess-india.edu.in/>.*

CONCLUSION

The BTG programme aims to provide children with a strong foundation for future learning, in part by offering an early exposure to spoken English. There is a need to reflect on this objective and consider how it can best be achieved, drawing on evidence-based best practices. While the value of competence in English is recognised, it must be ensured that the language backgrounds of children from non-English-speaking homes are respected and given a legitimate role in classroom learning. An awareness of the inherent variability of human speech can address assumptions which idealise monolingual education. An environment which encourages multilinguality is a closer reflection of natural language usage and can help remove barriers to learning faced by children whose home language differs from the target language of the classroom. The children come to the classroom with a robust knowledge of language, and teachers can use this knowledge as a resource on which to build competence in English and develop conceptual understanding.

What has been observed in the classroom is only a partial picture of a child’s language capability. As noted by Labov (1969), the social determinants of speech must not be underestimated, and one can imagine different language behaviour of the children amongst their family members and friends. Thus to provide optimal support for language learning, classroom practices must create a stress-free, friendly environment that encourages children’s expression of speech. As per the school motto, ‘because beginnings matter’, establishing a positive initial experience of school can help create the self-confidence and motivation needed for future academic success.

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