

Teaching Learning Materials in a Multilingual Education Programme

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Introduction

In 2008, the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA) issued a leaflet on the mother tongue based Multilingual Education programme (MLE) in the State, entitled 'Education for Tribal Children in Orissa'. In the leaflet, programme planners categorized Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) for MLE under two track strategies—Track I, which looked at the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP); and Track II, which evaluated Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). Track I focused on correctness and accuracy, and imbibing new knowledge; it included alphabet charts, alphabet books, number charts, number books, and Math books—all of which helped develop CALP. Track II comprised picture books such as the big book and the small book, experience stories, environment studies, games, sports, songs, tales and riddles, and focused on meaning and communication, and exploration of the child's experiences. Going by Jim Cummins' original BICS/CALP distinction, such categorization of TLMs under BICS and CALP seems to be a case of conceptual conflation. In Cummins's own words (2008), "The distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) was introduced by Cummins (1979, 1981a) in order to draw educators' attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they attempt to catch up to their peers in academic aspects of the school language. BICS refers to conversational fluency

in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school" (p. 71).

Mohanty (2011), simplifies this in the context of MLE, "From using language for social communication or, what has been called, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS, for short), children must develop to use language for reflective engagement with academic learning and purposeful thinking or to the level of cognitive and academic language proficiency" (p. 2).

The MLE programme

This means that first generation tribal students need to learn to use their mother tongue for academic discourses before moving on to using the school language. In the MLE programme, such TLMs, which call for greater, imaginative use of language, are used only to develop BICS when in fact they can be used to develop CALP as well. Given the kind of TLMs that have been categorized under CALP, it is the teacher who ends up doing all the talking. There is hardly any scope for the children to indulge in 'academic talk'. Stories, riddles and folk games, if used imaginatively by the teacher, could help initiate BICS and CALP talk simultaneously. Cummins (2008), talks about this simultaneity during his discussion on the evolution of the theoretical constructs of BICS and CALP: "The initial BICS/CALP distinction was elaborated into two *intersecting continua*

(Cummins, 1981a) that highlighted the range of cognitive demands and contextual support involved in particular language tasks or activities (context-embedded/context-reduced, cognitively undemanding/cognitively demanding) ... It was also recognized, however, that these dimensions cannot be specified in absolute terms because what is “context-embedded” or “cognitively demanding” for one learner may not be so for another as a result of differences in internal attributes such as prior knowledge or interest” (Coelho, 2004; Cummins, 1981a, p.74) (my emphasis).

It is evident that the distinction invoked in the MLE programme to separate TLMs is the result of conflation. Not only that, one is also led to read a hidden agenda in such an invocation. The experience stories, songs, riddles and folk games which are categorized under BICS are simply meant to draw the tribal students into the classroom; the academic language register is that of the dominant state language. The TLMs in the mother tongue which are used for BICS, could be used to develop academic discourse (CALP), but that would displace the established academic register. Also, since the mother tongue-intensive TLMs are seen to be useful only for BICS, they may not be considered fit materials for academic discourse as the grades advance.

Cummins also relates the difference between conversational and academic language registers to Gee’s distinction between primary and secondary discourses. The following explanation by Cummins (2008) is crucial in understanding the argument of this paper: “Secondary discourses can be oral or written and are equally central to the social life of non-literate and literate cultures. Examples of secondary discourse common in many non-literate cultures are the conventions of story-telling or the language of marriage or burial rituals which are passed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Within this conception, academic language proficiency represents an

individual’s access to and command of the specialized vocabulary and functions of language that are characteristic of the social institution of schooling. The secondary discourses of schooling *are no different in principle* than the secondary discourse of other spheres of human endeavor—for example, avid amateur gardeners and professional horticulturalists have acquired vocabulary related to plants and flowers far beyond the knowledge of those not involved in this sphere of activity. What makes acquisition of the secondary discourses associated with schooling so crucial, however, is that the life chances of individuals are directly determined by the degree of expertise they acquire in understanding and using this language (my emphasis)” (p. 75-76).

Cognitive transfer

The success in acquiring the ‘secondary discourses associated with schooling’, however, may be crucially dependent on the ‘secondary discourse of other spheres of human endeavor’. Beach’s study (1995), for example, provides important insights into how cognitive transfer is better when there is a strong relationship between schooling and work practices, or when participating in the practices of schooling and work are experienced as commensurable by the learners (Cobb & Bowers, 1999, p. 7). In the study which focused on ‘transitions between work and school’, Beach compared the arithmetical reasoning competencies of 13 shopkeepers attending adult education classes, and 13 high school students apprenticed to a shopkeeper in a Nepali village. The shopkeepers performed better than the students as they wanted to learn because they felt that by learning arithmetical reasoning, they would be able to increase profitability in their shops. The students, on the other hand, had to learn school arithmetic as an end in itself, as well as to generate profit as a shopkeeper. Cobb and Bowers (1999, p. 7) cite Hanks (1991) who says, “if both learning

and the subject learned are embedded in learned skills must rely on the commensurability of certain forms of participation.” In another study, Rampal et al. demonstrate how a domestic worker helps her daughter who is a fifth grader and is confounded by algorithms, by breaking a problem into manageable parts¹. That is how she does her everyday arithmetic. The purpose of these examples was to illustrate the necessity of using the ‘secondary discourse of other spheres of human endeavor’ to help the students acquire the ‘secondary discourse associated with schooling’. This secondary discourse of other spheres of human endeavor is embedded in the numerous stories, riddles, folk games and work practices of rural tribal communities. Panda and Mohanty (2009), both directors of the MLE Plus programme in Odisha have illustrated in their study on seventh grade Saora children, how a folk game called *Aphuchhi* can be used to teach probability.

Community knowledge, which includes work and play-related discourse, can therefore be regarded as a secondary discourse and a source of ‘academic language’. But the MLE programme planners seem to have missed this point. The MLE programme, for all its success, depends on the transfer of learning from the mother tongue to the school language. If the academic component of the secondary discourses conducted in the mother tongues of non-literate cultures is not exploited for classroom use, there is little hope of effective transfer of learning from the mother tongue to the school language. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to hope that MLE can rehabilitate community knowledge in the school curricula. To illustrate the point, one finds traditional measurement practices labeled as ‘non-standard’ in the MLE Math textbook.

To conclude, the title of the MLE leaflet says it all—‘Education for Tribal Children in Orissa’. The aim of the programme is to make students proficient in Odia which is the ‘cognitive academic language’. But how this aim can be

achieved when language-rich TLMs (from the mother tongue) are categorized under BICS is not clear. It is therefore essential to plan a careful use of TLMs for the so-called ‘two track strategies’.

¹ The fifth grader has to divide 180 by 3. The mother first separates 50 thrice. Of the remaining 30, she puts 10 along with each of the 50s so that at the end she has three separate 60s.

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