

Saying 'You can Use Your Own Language in the Classroom' Can Make a Change

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Introduction

This article focuses on the initiation of awareness of dialectal sources among teachers in areas where non-standard languages are spoken. I believe that it is possible for teachers to work on the structure of languages spoken by the children, plan bilingual teaching strategies and concentrate on the instructional language of the classroom. However, it is important to keep in mind that children's regular language use exhibits a lot of variation.

Language Variation in the Classroom

As a part of this study, some children from a remote village in Purulia district of West Bengal were asked to fill up some gaps in a worksheet in a simple text using Bangla words. The primary aim for giving them this worksheet was to identify the problem areas of the concerned children while writing in Bangla. These children spoke Kurmali at home, which is structurally quite different from standard Bangla – the school language for the children.

It was found that most of the children from classes 6 to 8 constructed a number of sentences using first person pronouns with third person verb forms. Sentences such as the following were common among a number of children (gloss provided below each word):

1. ami kOla khay.

I banana eat

(third person simple present tense)

After scanning the worksheets of some more children, it was found that children of the village hardly knew which verb form is to be used with first person pronouns in Bangla. Kurmali has a different set of verbal inflections from Bangla.

In different corners of Bengal (primarily in rural areas), a huge number of elementary level school teachers think that all their students speak the same language; the factors of language variation are ignored. The teachers use a text book written in standard Bangla, and they try to plan most of the lessons by using the regional standard. In fact concepts such as heterogeneity or variability in the languages of the children in a classroom are not considered as a resource by the teacher in many instances.

In reality, children in a classroom either speak different languages, or they speak different varieties of the same language. None of them use one single set of linguistic items (or words and constructions) from the same language in everyday speech. When the children speak a non-prestigious variety of a language, it is generally considered that the teacher and her class should focus on the standard language – Hindi, Telugu, or Bangla – whatever it may be. As a result of this, the use of local languages in classrooms is not encouraged. In many instances, the manuals for the teachers are quite authoritative, and direct the teachers to teach using the regional standard only. The children who speak various dialects of a language are viewed as a member of a community X, and it

is assumed that the community is homogeneous in nature. In reality, such a linguistic group and such a community is an 'Imagined Community' (Anderson, 1983).

Avoiding use of the local language or the home language of a child in class is indirectly telling the child that his/her language is inferior. Not only does it disrespect the students' cultural rights, but it also creates a barrier in the child's spontaneous creativity. The so-called non-prestigious language varieties are rarely used in classes by elementary school teachers for explanations or descriptions. However, it is extremely convenient to use them in regular classroom interaction. Moreover, it is really important to talk in the home language of the children, to allow the children to construct new sentences in their home language, and to use it in writing along with the language of formal schooling.

Linguistics Features versus Errors: Learning for a Classroom

This paper describes an awareness campaign for teachers with an aim to share the view that the children's knowledge of local language can be used as a resource in the classroom. In the 'using your own language in classroom' tour in West Bengal, I visited teachers and children in four different corners of West Bengal during the last few months. The aim of the tour was to get an idea of the children's home language, and to help them overcome language problems in the classroom. The tour targeted meetings with children who speak Kurmali, Rajbanshi, Khotta Bangla and East Bengali dialect influenced Bangla in four districts of Bengal (Purulia, Jalpaiguri, Malda and North 24 Parganas).

The teachers in the four selected districts helped us with the project by informing us about the basic structural features of their languages. After getting an idea about their language, a list

of major differences between the children's home language and school language was prepared, and worksheets were designed for children keeping in mind the differences between the two. The assumption was that, if the differences in language become predictable, it will be possible to get an idea of why children make 'errors' in classroom tasks and/or classroom interaction.

Informal interviews with students were also conducted. The students came in groups to their schools in the morning. The meetings also took place at their education support centre classes in the afternoon. The students filled up worksheets designed to diagnose their everyday language problems. In some cases, the children wrote a sentence or a small paragraph (along with drawing pictures). After accumulating all the writing samples and worksheets, the patterns of errors became clearer.

How can we describe the patterns of errors? For example, worksheets filled up by students at a village of Malda district showed a few patterns of verbal errors. A number of students wrote sentences without verbs. As Bangla is a verb final language, the sentences exhibited only the subject, and the object followed the subject. The slot for verb was empty in many cases. For example, one child wrote the following sentence:

2. ami EkTa phul (verb omitted)
I one (classifier) flower

The child perhaps tried to write that she has seen/drawn a flower. But as she was not sure which inflection to use, she dropped the verb entirely. There were some instances where the children had used the verb of the matrix clause in local language, and the verb of the embedded clause in Bangla. The teacher judged their answers as wrong. But in reality, the child had used two verb forms where both the forms belonged to his/her mental grammar.

Variability of language has been viewed as a resource to develop learning material for teaching. Meetings with teachers were organized so that they could share their views on the possible use of different languages in classroom. It was suggested in the meetings that the patterns of errors frequently or occasionally made by the students be used as an important resource for remedial teaching. It was also possible to develop material for use in class by explaining the reasons behind the errors. For example, if a child's home language has a different pattern of verb use in first person, the child tends to make errors while writing sentences using first person pronouns in Bangla. The example cited at the beginning for the Kurmali children becomes relevant here, where the child uses verbal forms for third person with a first person subject.

The local language awareness tour aimed to convey a simple fact to the teachers – it is possible to use the language of the children in the classroom, in different ways. It was also an opportunity to learn about local languages from the teachers and offer a linguistic perspective to them on the so-called errors of students by showing that these 'errors' could have a variety of sources and could be treated as steps in the process of learning. In fact the tour aimed to prepare a tool kit for teachers which they could use as a classroom aid, and shared the idea that different kinds of materials could be produced with a home language-school language combined resource. The materials included bilingual or bi-dialectal texts, exercises involving written tasks using words/constructions from two or multiple linguistic varieties, bilingual worksheets, etc.

Language Use of Children

If one interacts with children of different geographical regions even within a state, it will be found that they use different plural markers,

different tense markers, and different forms of verbs. The verbs of the regional standard may not vary according to number or gender, but the child may use different verb forms for singular and plural subjects, male or female subjects. In many cases, children use pronouns which are completely different from the pronouns of the regional standard. Also, a pronoun used in local language may refer to some other pronoun in regional standard.

An attentive observation of children's everyday language use reveals that children use a lot of linguistic items (sounds, words, phrases, etc.) in everyday speech which are different from the language of the text book. If a teacher regularly carries a notebook to the class and notes down the basic differences between the sounds, words and phrases of the child's home language and the regional standard, he/she could then start to create a record of the resources, and this could be used to develop materials for classroom use later.

It is also important for teachers to observe if the child is showing enough variation in natural language use in day-to-day life, both in a formal classroom situation and casual play time speech. If we carefully listen to the children around us, we will find that a child uses a local language/languages in different situations. For instance, a child uses a local variety while playing with other children, but tries to use the prestige variety while visiting a book shop located in a town. The child uses the lingua franca or the standard link language when needed, and in some cases also creates new forms of speech. The new set of words are sometimes the result of a failure to reach the target level of regional standard, and sometimes a venture to show to the city people that 'I do not belong to a dialect speaking group'. In many cases, the teachers observe that the children do not use new forms, mix different forms of speech together, or shift from one set of forms to another very

frequently. It has also been observed that if a child resides in a village near a bordering state, the child tends to use the regional standard of the other state, as he/she may have a playgroup of children from the other side of the border. Therefore, in different situations and at different places, the child exhibits different patterns of variation in everyday speech and also changes the speech pattern strategically. On the one hand, the use of different linguistic varieties at different times and spaces reflects the child's attitude towards different language forms. On the other hand, if a teacher prohibits the use of local language in school, that affects the child's identity.

Negotiating Classroom Variability

The teachers' understanding of language variation and heterogeneity needs to be a ground for classroom practices. Does the teacher pay attention to the fact that the child has enough potential to show a high degree of variation? In many instances, the answer is, 'yes'. The teacher in certain instances even tries to interact using both the child's home language and the language of formal schooling. Some resources can be created by utilizing two or multiple linguistic varieties in the following manner. The list of pronouns in table may be considered as a resource by a teacher who teaches the Kurmali speaking children of Purulia at Jhalda region.

With the help of Table 1, the teacher can create a table on the blackboard and write all possible first person pronouns available in the child's vocabulary. Another table may be created on the blackboard for all possible verb forms that match the first person forms. Now the teacher can ask the students to construct sentences using words from the two tables. The students will possibly create sentences by mixing and matching the different slots (Bangla, Kurmali and in some cases Hindi forms too). This gives freedom to the student to explore different constructions by alternative use of forms accessible to him or her.

A set of materials similarly developed with the corpus of both the local language and the regional standard can be used as a major classroom resource. A simple understanding of the language structure and variation in children's language can be helpful in developing teaching learning material. The teachers themselves can create easy-to-use materials which are bilingual or bi-dialectal. A simple story creating session can be conducted with the children where bilingual stories can be shared, noted down and preserved for future use. Description of a school text using local language can also be recorded and preserved. Vocabulary games can be created using words from both regional and standard dialect. All these bilingual texts can be used as a resource in future.

Table 1
Resource Created by Combining Two Linguistic Varieties of Bangla in Jhalda Region

	Bangla		Kurmali	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
First Person	ami	amra	mOi	hamra
Second Person	tui/tumi/apni	tera/tomra/upnara	tNOi	tera
Third Person	Se	ora	ONoi	Ora

Promoting Awareness for Bilingual Use in Classroom

Encouraging the use of local language in classrooms has a huge potential for benefitting the children. If the local language is promoted by using bilingual text development and bilingual tasks on a regular basis, it will lower the chances of the children facing prohibitory guidelines for local language use. It can even help them overcome their fears of a 'powerful' language. Punishments for speaking what teachers call 'bad' language in school can be stopped. Hence encouraging the use of the children's 'own' language can make a huge difference.

Our everyday language reflects the social realities and inequalities inherent in our society. In fact, children do not use their home language in social settings because of the stigma associated with it. Children also suffer if the teacher exhibits a negative attitude towards their local linguistic variety. New innovative practices are being used in classrooms by teachers aiming to modify the nature of language use. By practicing bilingual or bi-dialectal teaching on regular basis, linguistic discrimination in classroom may be prevented. By modifying the nature of interaction patterns and promoting the use of different linguistic forms in classrooms, one can initiate awareness of the bi-dialectal resources at the disposal of the teachers.

References

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