

Should Children Learn to Read and Write in their Mother Tongue?

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Introduction

The People's Linguistic Survey of India recorded 780 living languages in India. These living languages are mostly mother tongues of the majority of the people, the languages in which they communicate. In common parlance most of these languages are disparagingly called dialects, or distorted version of the standard languages. Out of these, 22 languages which have written and printed literature, are constitutionally recognized and listed in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution. Interestingly, English is not listed in the Eighth Schedule but is recognized as an official language. This makes the Indian education scenario very complex, given its multilingual reality and the dominance of English and, to some extent, the dominance of the regional languages.

The politics of marginalization of people's languages is at the heart of the hierarchy between dialect and language, the consequences of which people encounter on a daily basis (Saxena, 1993). Those dialects, which do not have a script and thus no written literature, are generally considered inferior, notwithstanding their rich repository of knowledge, unique world view, collective memory and oral literature. Also, there is a serious lack of understanding with regard to the social, historical and political processes of the emergence of dominant or regional languages and the so-called standard languages, and their relationship with dialects. A common misconception about these dialects or *bolis* as they are called in India is that they

are distorted versions of dominant languages. Further, they are believed to be devoid of structure or grammar. For example, most of the English and Hindi medium B.Ed. students that I have taught at the university level believed that dialects have no grammar or structure. These are people who are graduates and postgraduates in different disciplines and many of whom speak a dialect at home. Such attitudes are rooted in deeply entrenched social and class biases and arrogance.

Multilingual Classrooms and Language of Teaching

It is not the linguistic limitations of dialects, but the political and economic processes that result in the marginalization of communities, their languages, cultures and worldviews, and lead to the emergence of dominant or standard languages. These mainstream standard languages are then considered languages of power. English is neither a regional nor a constitutional language, yet it is a language of power in India. Interestingly though, by and large, rural as well as urban Indian classrooms are multilingual, as there are children from different communities speaking different languages who come here. These children also then learn languages present in the classrooms, and become multilingual. Despite evidence from research which shows that multilingual children develop better thinking ability, there is no policy to tap this rich classroom resource. Instead the emphasis is either on the imposition of a dominant

language or English. The teachers, caught in the dialect-standard language discourse and seeking simple solutions, also insist on teaching in a standard language, even at the cost of silencing the majority of children. This seemingly simple solution has had serious consequences on the reading, comprehension and writing competencies in all languages.

What do we Understand of the Reading Process?

Devy (2017) says that though English is a powerful language in India, "Yet, it is an established scientific principle that early education in the mother tongue helps in proper development of cognitive and the ability for abstraction". Das (2017), points out the advantages of familiarity of language in developing literacy. She writes, "The second generation Santals believed that in the early schooling, it is easier to develop reading and writing skills in mother tongue...since they continuously hear and speak the same language at home unlike the languages used in schools" (p. 78-79). Thus, in addition to the debate around the medium of instruction in the early stages of schooling, there is yet another issue that needs to be discussed. It is not just the bias and ignorance of the policy makers with regard to the advantages of teaching in the mother tongue and making use of the linguistic diversity in the class; but also their narrow understanding of the reading and writing processes that has also contributed to the failure in literacy acquisition at national level. Therefore, even if the language of teaching becomes the mother tongue, the ignorance of the reading and writing processes could still wipe out its advantages.

"Traditionally", says Sinha (2010), "reading was viewed narrowly as a decoding process, that is, of finding oral equivalent of written language"

(p. 123). However, there is ample research that has established that reading is not a mechanical decoding process, but an engaging and sense-making activity, where children become literate by actively generating a hypothesis about the print around them. However, our primers have continued to focus on decoding. On the basis of her study of 10 Hindi primers, Sinha wrote, "... the analysis revealed total absorption with graphophonics. Lessons were constructed around particular sounds, not themes.... Due to their obsession with sounds to the exclusion of everything else, the texts are unfocused and at times blatantly absurd.... These texts actually teach 'not' to seek meaning"(p. 122). Literacy however is not confined to phonics, but includes the whole act of reading, including comprehension, guessing and meaning-making. So, if the reading material or the primers in mother tongue are developed around sounds and not themes, these may not contribute positively to the literacy process. Thus, along with the question of languages of literacy, a holistic understanding of the reading process also gains urgency.

Parents' Demand for Teaching in the "Language of Power"

In the context of the issues raised here, there is yet another complication that needs to be discussed. On the one hand, educationists advocate that the medium of instruction in the classroom should be the mother tongue, at least up to the elementary level; there is also evidence to substantiate its cognitive and epistemic value as well as the learning problems caused by instructions in an alien language. On the other hand, parents demand that their wards be taught the language of power, the language of the market. Proliferation of private schools and parent's struggle to send their children to the

so-called English medium schools is an evidence of the language hierarchy and divide that has only deepened in last 70 years. The languages of the Eighth Schedule are also powerful at the regional levels but, as is well known, they are not the languages of the vast majority of the marginalized groups, especially the Adivasis. Ganesh Devy (2010) reminds us that languages emerge out of human activities and labour. It is an organic process and takes a long time to develop. How can people's rich languages be replaced with any alien language, such as English, overnight? Yet, to gain political mileage, many state governments take advantage of people's insecurities and introduce English teaching from primary levels, with serious consequences (Modi, 2017).

While parental anxieties and concerns are fully justified in the context of the power that English and to some extent, Hindi and some other Eighth Schedule languages hold, yet, the role of the spoken language in achieving reading and comprehension skills cannot be undermined. A recent UNESCO study underlines the significance of the mother tongue in the early stages of schooling, even in bilingual and multilingual classrooms. Its research findings confirm that children learn best in their mother tongue, "as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education" (Ball, 2011, p. 6). To endorse this hypothesis, in the following section, I will share an experience of a programme which combined the use of the mother tongue as well as an understanding of early literacy to teach reading comprehension.

Experience from the Field

Here, I would like to share the experience of an innovative literacy programme called "Children's Activity Programme" (CAP), that was especially designed to support literacy activity in schools and run non-formal centres for out of school children. The programme was

conducted in about 20 villages of Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh in the early 1980s by a voluntary organisation called Kishore Bharati. The CAP group had earlier observed the Hindi language learning classes in the primary schools of that area where, pedagogically, repetition of alphabets and sound-based words was the norm. The parents complained that their children had not learnt reading and writing even after five years of schooling.

For CAP, nearly fifty Hindi and English children's story books were translated in the local language of the children which was primarily Bundeli, interspersed with Gondi words. The translated content was typed in Devanagari script and pasted on the books. These Bundeli books were given to children in the non-formal education centres. Parallel to this, classes in reading were also organized, which were interestingly attended by both, school dropouts and school going children. The group also ran mobile, cycle-borne libraries in these villages and several other villages. Reading aloud from these books was a regular activity in the classes as well as the non-formal centres. Children actively participated in the read aloud activity by flipping through the pages of the book, and running their fingers on the printed text to identify the titles, sentences and words. After some time, the children would pretend to read the books on their own, which is a well-recognized activity in early literacy.

In order to create a print-rich environment and opportunities for children's informal interaction with print, the mobile libraries also had about 100 Hindi story books. These books generated a lot of interest amongst the children who either read independently or did "pretend reading". They even insisted that the library procure new books after they had "read" all 100 books. While "reading", the children would take cues from the illustrations or guess words from the stories

and unconsciously replace many Hindi words with Bundeli words. Consequently, the Hindi to Bundeli translation of the stories happened spontaneously. This was indicative of the children's engagement with the text and their effort in seeking meaning.

Constant demand for new books, even by those children who were not able to read in the traditional sense, was the most memorable and fascinating experience. These children, of course, had become early literacy experts as they could identify the books by their titles and cover illustrations. Many of them could also narrate the whole story, flipping the pages as though they were "reading". This first-hand experience of early literacy was truly fascinating and gave us confidence in this whole language learning methodology. Children from formal schools were attracted to the informal settings of the reading classes-under a tree, or on a dilapidated village *chabuttra* (platform), or a veranda of a house, with all kinds of reading activities-and they started coming in hordes. The choice of the book for reading was always preceded by an animated discussion on the book. Since the teacher did not interrupt or "correct" anything, be it pronunciation, spellings, or even switching from Hindi to Bundeli or to a mixture of both languages, it facilitated a free flow of information and ideas. The children truly enjoyed the fun of uninterrupted reading.

To generate interest in writing, another very creative exercise was undertaken. Children who could write were encouraged to give their written pieces for a cyclostyled children's magazine, *Balchirrayya*. However, the ones who had not learnt how to write were equally keen to see their stories published. This led to another very unusual initiative-another cyclostyled magazine called *Gulgula*. The person in charge of the informal centre would sit with the children and ask them to narrate their stories, which he would transcribe for them. He would then read aloud the written version

and ask for suggestions/ changes/ corrections from the narrator. Seeing their oral stories transformed into written form gave the children a sense of achievement and motivated them to build the association between the written and the oral forms of language. These cyclostyled magazines became the new additions in the mobile library repository.

In this context, a recent write-up by Alaknanda (2017) came as a breath of fresh air. Shetalks of the ease with which the children in Madhya Pradesh learnt how to read and write when the Hindi books were translated into their own languages. The experience and the academic evidence of the benefits of reading as a meaning-seeking exercise confirms that initial literacy learning should be in the language children are conversant in. The imposition of standard or dominant languages in formal schools leads to cultural and linguistic alienation that pushes children into a culture of silence. This has a detrimental impact on their self-image and confidence. It can be even worse if the teacher is also completely illiterate/ignorant about the treasures of linguistic plurality, and engages in symbolic violence by facilitating the imposition of a standard language.

Concluding Remarks

Marginalization of people's languages, cultural and material resources through unjust political processes is one reality. The other reality is their demand or at least the hope, that their children have access to the language of power. Given the research evidence regarding the use of mother tongue and the understanding of the reading process, it is important that languages that are alien to the children should not be introduced in the early stages of schooling. The real challenge however is to resolve this paradox by making literacy a meaningful process and at the same time make the language/ languages of power accessible to the large majority of children.

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