

Learning in a Multilingual Context

Binay Pattanayak

Background

Jharkhand is a multilingual state, home to more than thirty-two indigenous communities who use around nineteen indigenous and regional languages. Some of these prominent link languages work as bridges between different indigenous languages in the state. The state has nine *Particularly Vulnerable Indigenous Groups* (PVTGs) and some of their languages are extremely endangered.

Children from all these communities encounter huge learning disadvantages in their early school years as their home languages are very different from Hindi, the school language. On an average, a third of the children entering the primary schools in the state drop out in the early grades, making this the highest dropout rate of children in the nation. Children who continue are so frustrated that by class VIII even they struggle to continue as they do not understand the content of their textbooks or their teachers who teach and test in Hindi, completely rejecting the children's learning experiences from home and community. Hence, learning outcomes of the state's students in the national learning achievement surveys of NCERT, ASER, etc. continue to appear at the bottom of the list of states. Other reasons for the low performance are political instability and non-availability of local textbooks.

Interestingly, the state has notified twelve indigenous (tribal) and regional languages as its official languages after Hindi and English. However, none of the 40,000 primary schools had any scope for the use of children's mother languages in the classroom. The administration did not seem to be bothered about the issue of highest dropout rates, lowest learning outcomes and also alarmingly low attendance of both teachers and students. There was never any discussion on these serious issues related to the majority of children in the state.

To understand the learning experience of children in the early years, and the causes of school dropouts, a team was formed and named *Mother-tongue-based Active Language Learning* (M-TALL).

M-TALL and its initiatives

Based on the feedback from schools, communities and their children, colour-coded language maps of the state indicating the priority of languages were constructed. What emerged from this exercise was that regional dialects were being used in 96% by the respondents and only 4% of the people communicated in Hindi as their mother tongue. Whether it was for communicating with parents or playing or just day-to-day interactions, most of the children used their own regional dialects and languages. So, it became clear that the learning challenges the children faced, leading to boredom and dropping out were largely due to the language differences.

Development of picture dictionaries

Working on these findings, discussions were held with different language expert groups to understand what children in each community like to do in their early years.

Those child-friendly areas were compiled as broad themes for the children's mother-tongue-based school language readiness initiatives. We found that children like to play, sing, dance, discuss with various people and friends, make toys, explore, tell/listen to stories, read picture storybooks. We also compiled children's favourite stories, songs, dance, riddles, pictures, toys, games, art and craft, and other experiences.

In 2014, M-TALL developed *Meri Bhasha Mein Meri Duniya* (my world in my Language), bilingual picture dictionaries in nine indigenous and regional languages for use in *Anganwadis* as well as by teachers or parents in small groups of children (more useful if children from different language groups were there) by looking at a page together and discussing various elements of the picture in own language and sharing their experience with each object or event. This enabled every child and the concerned teacher or parent to use this as a rich local learning resource. It aided interaction with the picture, text, peers, teacher and parents. It helped to lay a strong foundation to the language

learning skills of the child (or children), along with the enrichment of her knowledge, skills, attitude and interest in the concept, first, in the mother tongue, closely followed by the same in Hindi and other languages, depending on the level of language diversity in the group and the level and direction of the interaction.

This was followed by pictures of each of the above themes to be used as children's learning primers for small group discussions among children of different language groups. *Anganwadi sevikas* and teachers encouraged children to narrate their own experiences and ideas around the pictures in their own languages.

New words used by children were noted down by the facilitators for use later. Separate language baskets (*bhasha tokri, bhasha bhandar*) were kept in two corners of the room to enable the facilitator to write down the new words and stories from the children for use in the classroom later. Gradual compilation of such words and stories enabled the concerned facilitators to formulate learning resources for their own institutions in the form of dictionaries, storybooks, songbooks, etc. The initial discussions in children's mother tongues enabled children to strengthen their basic language learning skills. Gradually, these discussions were encouraged in Hindi to enable children to use their initial language learning skills in picking up the basics of Hindi communication. The project became very popular with the whole community. Bilingual picture dictionaries have a big potential in facilitating discussions on various aspects of the social life of children and people in rural areas in any part of the nation.

Bhasha Puliya

Since it was generally felt that pre-school education of children must be facilitated in children's first languages, in 2015, M-TALL developed *Bhasha Puliya*, a children's language readiness package that aims to bridge home language/s of children with the language/s of *Anganwadis* and primary schools in Jharkhand. A series of child-friendly learning activities were integrated into this package in a systematic manner to enable children to actively participate in these learning activities and, through this, acquire the desired skills which form the building blocks of the pre-school education programme.

Twelve key learning milestones were covered through twelve activity guidebooks, forming

learning ladders touching upon all the activities in a sequence: learning assessment formats, activity progress chart, baseline format, a guidebook for *Bhasha Puliya*, an academic calendar for the whole year, and folders for filing away local words and stories/songs.

The programme had a significant impact on children's school readiness and language learning skills and provided clear evidence that mother-tongue based pre-school education enables each child to enjoy the learning processes, acquire language learning skills and get school-ready for introduction to the world of alphabets, numbers and then, for subject-specific learning. They also learn how to take part in learning activities in teams and learn together.

Success of the programmes

It is now an established fact that learning a language needs a multi-pronged approach. Writers sat with the community language workers to map out the major activities in their community which take place in their area where children actively take part. For example, taking part in various festivals and social activities in the summer season, enjoying visits to various markets, fields, fruit gardens and nearby areas for celebrating summer festivals are all part of their daily life, which help children learn the concepts scheduled for the initial part of the year. For example, class I children are enabled to take part in a wide range of interesting learning activities, such as singing songs, playing together, listening to stories, sharing experiences, draw and reading pictures, etc. so that they take more interest in the learning activities in the school.

Just as the language content developers identify occasions, stories, poems, riddles, etc. associated with the community festivals and occupations, the maths content designers have used rangoli, wall designs, objects associated with shapes and sizes in the community pursuits and planned for interesting learning activities which could engage children in mathematical explorations, thinking and discussions.

Activity-oriented learning paths

A variety of learning activities were designed for different quarters of the year which would enthuse and engage all children. Each chapter of the book was designed in such a manner that it carried different types of learning projects to enable children to enjoy the diversity and learn enough

to reach the set learning goals. For example, the language book writers introduced language in a very rich manner by designing the content in the form of stories, songs, riddles, puzzles, skits, plays, etc. which would engage children in these joyful creative activities and thereby, help them discover the beauty and diversity of the subject. Participating in all these, children also discover how creative content is designed using local experiences and events, which they are already familiar with.

Community-supported pedagogical processes

Textbook writers aimed at associating the community resource persons in the form of storytellers, singers, dancers, musicians, poets, actors, riddle-makers, etc. to visit schools and conduct these activities in collaboration with school teachers, bringing a new dimension to the pedagogical processes. Children are amazed to see familiar persons and relatives play the role of teachers. With their rich skills, the community resource persons find a scope to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in guiding children towards the learning goals of the class. This community-based approach enriches the school's pedagogical processes significantly.

Graded reading resources

Around twenty big storybooks for class I contain child-friendly and interesting stories related to language and mathematics. They are attractively illustrated with short write-ups in a large font. The facilitators use these books to show the pictures to children and familiarise them with the related text, such as *cat, tree, mother*, etc. Using these, children gradually get familiarised with the alphabets and numbers in the first year. In the second year, another twenty smaller storybooks were designed with smaller illustrations and more texts in smaller fonts to enrich the reading practice of children.

The content designers were careful about whether the activities that touch upon the main concepts of the topic, are age-appropriate, interesting, contextual and interesting. Balance is ensured so that no chapter is long or text-heavy for the children; and, contains instructions for teachers and other details. The illustrations, depicting the life and experiences of children in their communities, are designed to stimulate the thinking and the joy of children and facilitators.

How children can learn

To make sure that every child learns, some key

features of the schools where mother-tongue based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) programme is implemented are: a vibrant physical and academic environment, well-thought-out pedagogical plans and processes, and learning collaboration with community resource groups. Also included is, support from DIET, BRC, CRC and NGOs. The school is seen as a centre for research and innovation for the village/community. Here are some of the key features:

A prepared school and society

Along with the textbooks, we also made concept notes and training modules. Through language mapping in ten indigenous populated districts, about a thousand schools were chosen in which children spoke only in the affiliated indigenous language. Initially, environment-building activities were undertaken in these school areas for familiarising the teachers and community members with the government's plan for initiating a mother-tongue based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE) programme using new textbooks. Teachers of these schools were trained and familiarised with the content and pedagogical processes associated with the new approach.

Involving the whole community

Community resource groups in the form of storytellers, singers, dancers, musicians, riddle-makers, toy-makers, comedians, etc were constituted in each school. Meetings between schools and the community resource groups linked textbooks with the roles of the resource persons in facilitating pedagogical processes in different subjects. Schools, then, developed an academic calendar indicating which group would visit a particular school with necessary preparations to work with children and enable them to acquire desired knowledge and skills.

Government involvement

The Government of Jharkhand now runs a Mother-Tongue based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programme using these materials and training in around a thousand schools in ten districts of the state for which new textbooks for primary level were developed under the guidance of the author in seven indigenous and regional languages. Language and mathematics textbooks have generated a lot of enthusiasm and interest among the children, the teachers and the concerned community members. This community-based approach has transformed

the schools with active students, enthusiastic teachers and dynamic community supported activities.

Conclusion

The MTB-MLE programme has transformed schools and generated tremendous enthusiasm in the concerned indigenous communities. Enrolment and attendance of both, teachers and students, have improved significantly with a significant

reduction in the dropout rates in these schools. Classrooms, once silent, are now vibrating with renewed energy, enthusiasm, community support and active participation in learning activities. With the active cooperation of community members, the folklore-based content has injected a new life into classroom processes and, ultimately, made societal changes. These books can be adapted to suit any national language with contextual inputs from the relevant locality.



Binay Pattanayak is the founder of the M-TALL Akhra in Jharkhand. Presently, he works as Team Leader of the Implementation Support Agency (ISA) for the World Bank-supported project 'Enhancing Teacher Effectiveness in Bihar'. He is Senior Education Consultant to the World Bank, India. Prior to this, he served with UNICEF, India as Education Specialist for more than 8 years at their New Delhi and Jharkhand offices. Before this, he worked with MHRD, Government of India as Chief Consultant (quality education) on behalf of a national Technical Support Group (TSG) for a decade. He has written and translated more than 180 books for children and teachers on science and education for children other than his work on curriculum and textbooks used in several states and has won several national and state awards. He can be contacted at binaypattanayak@outlook.com

We expect our teachers to teach all the children the same thing at the same time with the same method and get the same results – an idea that is 'designed to fail', because what this does is to make sure that a great proportion of children, who are otherwise bright and capable are left out of the learning process for one reason or the other.

Subir Shukla, Why We Need Responsive Schools, p 92.