

# How do Teachers Handle Linguistic Diversity in Classrooms?

**Devaraja Kodabala | [devaraj@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:devaraj@azimpremjifoundation.org)**

Devaraja Kodabala is a Resource Person at the Koppal District Institute of Azim Premji Foundation. His interests center on Kannada language teaching, language textbooks and continuous language teacher education.

**Key Words:** Linguistic diversity, Multilingual strategies, Vocabulary building, Teaching

## Abstract

Linguistic diversity is both a challenge and a resource. It is a resource because children bring tacit knowledge of language to the classrooms. It is a challenge because our understanding of the different ways of using diversity as a resource is very gross. The paper tries to unpack the classroom black-box to see how teachers manage linguistic diversity. I will look at three schools, two of which are located in the Karnataka-Telangana border region and one in Bangalore city. The purpose of describing the ways these schools deal with linguistic diversity is not to tell a tale of success. Instead, it is to describe the existing situation and bring to light the struggles and reflections faced by the teachers in grappling with linguistic diversity in the classroom. The paper ends with a few suggestions for pre and in-service professional learning of teachers.

## Introduction

This paper is based on the version presented at the seminar "Teachers in the Current Scenario of School Education", held at Mysore in April 2018.

Linguistic diversity is the heart of multilingualism. Schools have an essential role to play in promoting and nurturing linguistic diversity. Diversity is promoted through the use of multiple languages in education (National Council for Education Research and Training, 2005), as a medium and as subjects. While the reasons for multilingualism are many at the individual level, at a societal level, two important factors contribute to it. Linguistic diversity is characteristic of areas that share borders with neighbouring states, and those spaces where there is an influx of migrants. These facts of multilingual life make classrooms a rich source of linguistic diversity. Teachers face a here-and-now challenge of dealing with linguistic diversity in the classroom because they have to address diversity-related issues while facilitating curricular knowledge. To understand how teachers address linguistic diversity, I will take three schools as illustrative cases. The purpose of this paper is not to tell a success story. The teachers are as yet unsure whether their strategies would work or not in the long run. Instead, the paper highlights the efforts of teachers as they grapple with this challenge in their everyday teaching. It also questions the general perception that teachers are "uninterested", and teach mechanically.

## Strategies for Dealing with Linguistic Diversity

As mentioned earlier, we selected two schools from the Karnataka-Telangana

border region and a Learning Centre in Bangalore City. The two schools selected for the study are located in Seedam, in Gulbarga District of Karnataka. Seedam is 150 kilometers away from Gulbarga, and shares borders with Tandur Taluk of the Rangareddy and Kodangal Taluk of the Mahabubnagar Districts of Telangana. The first school is an Urdu medium school, and is located in Seedam; the second is a Kannada medium school located in Motakapalli of Seedam Taluk. The data for the case study is based on periodic observation over a period of one year to the two schools combined with talking to teachers. The data on the Learning Centre is from two sources, namely observations and talking to facilitators over a month combined with information from an unpublished report (Azim Premji Foundation, 2012).

### Case Study 1: Strategy in Urdu Medium School

The Urdu medium school is located in Seedam in a predominantly Urdu speaking area. It is a higher primary school with Kannada as a second language. Officially, Kannada as a subject is introduced in Grade 3. Unofficially, however, the school teaches Kannada as a second language from Grade 1, though it is not an assessed subject. The concern of the school is to increase the Kannada competency of students in keeping with their overall competence.

To address this concern, the teachers made a list of all the problems faced by the students in learning Kannada. A root cause analysis of the problems brought to light the reason for the limited exposure of the students to Kannada. There was very little Kannada in the surrounding environment. At home, students spoke Urdu, and outside their homes, they spoke Urdu mixed with Kannada. The teachers hypothesized that if the exposure to Kannada, at least within the classroom, could be increased, then the Kannada competency of the students could be

improved. Teachers began to engage the students in a range of activities in Kannada—storytelling, singing simple rhymes, singing action songs and drawing. Some, but not all these activities were part of the textbooks. While the focus of these activities was on using Kannada, students were free to use Urdu; its equivalents in Kannada were provided by the teachers. The broader purpose of these activities was two-fold: first, these were intended to increase the motivational level of the students for learning Kannada; second, they helped to develop a nuanced awareness of Kannada.

For the older students, teachers began to vary their strategy. While teaching the lesson, teachers often stopped to show pictures connected to the situation described in the lesson. The teachers themselves drew these pictures. Teachers also prepared flash cards and word lists to consolidate the learning of students. The teachers encouraged the students to share the gist of the lesson in their own words. Initially, students used Urdu with a bit of Kannada to talk about the essence of the lesson. Then, the teacher summed up the gist in Kannada. With an increase in the competency levels of the students, their gist contained more and more Kannada words. These were extremely intensive activities; the language teachers sought the help of senior students as well as other teachers. These activities helped students to develop competencies to carry out conversations in Kannada. Their communication skills improved along with their motivation levels as reflected in increased classroom participation as well as increased use of Kannada.

The schools also focused on developing competencies in reading and writing in Kannada. Developing reading and writing in Kannada was extremely challenging because Urdu has a right to left script while Kannada script goes from left to right script. Teachers read out short

stories in Kannada. Students listened to these stories and retold them in Kannada. They were also encouraged to write the summary of the stories in Kannada. For writing, the first step was to make the students comfortable with the left to right psychomotor movements. To do this, teachers used sand or Rangoli powder. (Rangoli powder is a powder used to make patterns on the floor). Teachers were clear that they were focusing on the skill part of writing. At the very least, the fear of Kannada reduced in the minds of these students and their exposure to Kannada increased substantially.

### **Case Study 2: Strategy Used in a Kannada Medium School in a Telugu Speaking Area**

The second case study involved a Kannada-medium higher primary school, located in Motakapalli of Seedam Taluk. Since it is very close to the Telangana border, Telugu is the dominant language in the area. Most students speak two languages, their mother tongue and Telugu. There is more linguistic diversity in this school as compared to the school discussed in the first case study. Students speak Telugu, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi and Lambani (a scheduled tribe language; 2 percent of the population in Motakapalli belong to the Lambani tribe). Kannada is the first language in the school, but the competency of students in Kannada is far below their grades. A common strategy followed in this school is for the teachers to read out the text in Kannada and then explain it in Telugu. The students understand the text, but respond in Telugu. When they are asked to respond in Kannada, they had difficulties. In discussions where students were required to work in groups, they tended to form a group with students with whom they shared a mother tongue. Students had difficulty in reading and writing in Kannada, and this brought down their learning achievements. The teachers in this school often reflected and shared their concerns about the strategy they

were using. They questioned themselves on the appropriateness of their strategy. Were they reducing the exposure to Kannada for these students? Did explaining in Telugu help the students in developing competencies in Kannada? Was it appropriate to use Kannada along with a bit of Telugu? Would this create problems for the students? Or should Kannada be the only language used in all Kannada subject classes?

These questions are not unique in themselves. They show that teachers do keep the learning of students central to their teaching. They are concerned about using the most appropriate method for teaching Kannada. Simultaneously, they seem to be reflecting on their own beliefs about multilingual education. The teachers do see linguistic diversity as a resource but have very little knowledge of how to deal with it. They reflect that they are aware of this knowledge gap. They agonise that in a bid to reach a pragmatic solution, they are perhaps nullifying this diversity. Their reflections indicate their desire to know about other strategies for using language as resources.

### **Case Study 3: Multilingual Strategy for Dealing with Linguistic Diversity**

The third case study is slightly different as it looks at a Learning Centre for the children of migrant families (most of whom are construction workers), located in Bangalore city. The Centre serves as a bridge to enable students to transfer to state-run primary schools or any other school chosen by the parents (Azim Premji Foundation 2012). The Centre has students from the states of Bihar, Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal, and most students speak Kannada and Urdu. The school presents a picture of diversity. Half of these students have no previous school experience, while those who have some school experience have not attained the age-appropriate competencies. To complicate the issue, these are students who belong to a wide range of ages. What

is unique about this school is that they use strategies that provide a seamless learning experience that transcends language and subject boundaries. Students are encouraged to move from one language to another and from one subject to another. As a result, they are exposed to a variety of languages, and actively acquire knowledge of multiple languages in the process of acquiring subject knowledge.

The Learning Centre offers many opportunities for students to express themselves. In activities like storytelling, students are encouraged to make masks for use in storytelling. Since the Centre involves students of multiple age ranges, most of the activities are group activities. Students are encouraged to form mixed language groups, and the stress is on gaining authentic language experience. Students go on field trips, such as going to a vegetable market learning words and phrases related to vegetables and buying and selling; they also learn about other cultures by interacting with community members to know about the festivals or marriage traditions of the community. In every group, students who know the language are encouraged to help those who do not know the language. After students come back from their field trips, they share their experience using words, pictures and letters to describe their visits. In this sharing, individual students are free to speak on any subject and share their experiences in any language they are comfortable with. Students build on their experience by learning new words through the use of picture words, picture reading and similar sounding words. The objective of the activity is to immerse the students in language experience, regardless of the language. They are required to describe things, create sentences and stories using words relevant to the activity. For example, if the activity is learning another culture, students use words that are used by the community members. In an activity like a visit to the market, students use

Kannada names of vegetables, words for buying and selling, They also learn these words in other languages. Since students come from the same neighbourhood, they are asked to study and do their homework or joint activities with other students who are not from their language background. Such peer group interactions sensitise the students to the different languages in the community, including Kannada.

In addition to encouraging students to move between languages, students are given opportunities to learn the first, second and third languages—Kannada, English and Hindi are taught in a targeted manner by integrating them. For instance, the students had to learn the names of animals and birds both in Kannada and in Hindi. The translation method is extensively used to translate from Hindi to Kannada and vice versa. The facilitators give counterexamples to show that some words cannot be translated into other languages so that students understand the limitations of translation. The emphasis was on understanding and articulating in Kannada and Hindi. The teaching of English also follows a similar multilingual pedagogy. In this process of teaching the three languages, the nouns, verbs and new words are translated from Kannada to English and Hindi to English and listed. The students are asked the meanings of these words, after which they use them in sentences and identify the grammatical category to which these words belong. If a student does not know the structure of a Kannada or English sentence, they are free to create it in their mother tongue, and then with the help of other students recreate it in Kannada or English. In this way, multilingual pedagogy is used to help the children learn Kannada, English and Hindi. Math and Environmental Science were also taught in the same way.

Besides the lessons, the Learning Centre uses a variety of supportive activities to promote these three languages. Some of

these are briefly discussed as follows:

- a) Experience sharing: Every Friday is allocated to experience sharing. Two students act as leaders in these sessions. Students share situations that made them happy, sad, or in which they hurt someone. Students are free to use their mother tongue to share their experiences on any subject. These experiences are translated into Kannada. Student leaders are selected in consultation with the students and on a rotation basis. Efforts are made to ensure that the two student leaders are from different language backgrounds. In this way, all students get an opportunity to lead the discussion. Such an activity helps the students to increase their language competence and also build their confidence.
- b) Building vocabulary in Kannada, English and Hindi: Several strategies are used to build vocabulary in the target languages. Some of these are listed as follows:
  - i) Word for the day: In this activity, students state their favorite word in either Kannada, Hindi or Kannada. The facilitator then asks a few questions (for example, "Why did you choose that word? Where did you learn this word? What was your experience with the word"? ). The purpose of this activity is to allow for meaningful learning. Then the student writes the word on the blackboard in either Kannada, Hindi or English. Either the same student or other students write these words in the other two languages. Where students do not know how to write the word, the facilitator writes it on the board. Then students write these words in their notebooks and read them as a group and revise them everyday for the first few days and then twice in a week. A word for the day is chosen and is used to teach phonics. Students are encouraged to think of similar sounding words and these are written

on the blackboard. The entire class reads out these words.

- ii) Picture-making vocabulary: Each child has an illustrated vocabulary book for Kannada, English and Hindi. Students are encouraged to add to the book.
- iii) Book-making: Students choose a topic to write a book on; for example, a book on family members. The names of the family members along with how they are related to the student is written in English, Kannada and Hindi. Students have to read the names of their family members at least a couple of times in a month. They also express their feelings towards the family members they have named, which helps them to develop the syntax across the three languages.
- iv) Subject wise words: The classroom walls are divided into different subject sections; Math has one section, Science has its own section, and so on. The keywords for the subjects are written on the corresponding wall. Initially, these words are accompanied by pictures, but the pictures are gradually phased out. Students practice using these words. The words on the walls are changed regularly.
- v) Library usage: Every week, students have two library classes. In these classes, teachers read out the stories and explain using pictures. Here also, the students are made to experience the story. Some words in the story are used as prompts for children to come up with examples. This process is repeated in Kannada, English and Hindi. The library is organized into three

sections—storybooks in three languages, two languages and single language books. At the end of the week, the students take a favourite book of theirs, read them and share it with their classmates during the library period.

## Conclusion

The three cases illustrate the efforts made by schools to deal with linguistic diversity. As pointed earlier, these are not intended to be showcased as best practices or successful attempts. It is important that teaching is adjusted to meet the needs of the students and their local context. In all the cases, there is an effort to develop the languages using the linguistic resources of the students. The teachers in these schools do not consider any language or dialect to be inferior. These cases throw up insightful direction for pre and in-service teacher learning.

If we want our teachers to deal effectively with linguistic diversity, the pre and in-service teacher learning has to focus on the following:

- Respect and use the linguistic resources of the students
- Build on their knowledge of the language
- Modify teaching, keeping the goal of nurturing linguistic diversity among students and the larger society
- Extend the process of teaching constantly to include the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

## References

Azim Premji Foundation (2012). *Multilingual experience in ECML Centres*. Unpublished Manuscript.

National Council for Education Research and Training (2005). *NCF position paper: National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages*, New Delhi: NCERT.