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## Language and the National Curriculum Framework

Indu Prasad



Language is the medium through which children talk to themselves and to others, and it is with words that they begin to construct and get a grip on their reality. The ability to understand and use language clearly and cogently is necessary for learning to take place. Language is not only a means of communication - it is also a medium through which most of our knowledge is acquired. It is a system that, to a great extent, structures the reality around us for representing it in our minds - it is a marker of our identity in a variety of ways and it is closely associated with power in society.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) endorses the stand of human beings having an innate language faculty. Children come to school with communicative competence in their language or languages. They enter the school not only with thousands of words but also with control of the rules that govern the complex and rich structure of language at the level of sounds, words, sentences and discourse. Multilingualism, according to the NCF, must be used as a resource, a classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher. This is not only the best use of a resource readily available, but also a way of ensuring that every child feels secure and accepted, and that no one is left behind on account of her linguistic background.

The NCF says that basic language skills are adequate for meeting situations that are contextually rich and cognitively undemanding, such as peer-group interaction. Advanced-level skills are required in situations that are contextually poor and cognitively demanding such as writing an essay on an abstract issue.

The goal of first-language education, therefore, is to hone these skills by progressively fostering advanced-level communicative and cognitive abilities in the classroom. At the basic primary stage, a child's languages must be accepted as they are with almost no attempt to correct them. From Class 3 onwards, oracy and literacy will be tools for learning and for developing higher-order communicative skills and critical thinking. By Class 4, if rich and interesting exposure is made available, the child will herself acquire the standard variety and the rules of correct orthography, but care must be taken to honour and respect the child's own language(s). It should be accepted that errors are a necessary part of the process of learning and that children will correct themselves only when they are ready to do so. Instead of focusing attention on errors and 'hard spots', it would be much better to spend time providing children comprehensible, interesting and challenging inputs.

Language education, according to the NCF, is not confined to the language classroom. A science, social science or mathematics class is ipso facto a language class. Learning the subject means learning the terminology, understanding the concepts, and being able to discuss and write about them critically. At the same time, the language class offers some unique opportunities. Stories, poems, songs and drama link children to their cultural heritage and give them an opportunity to understand their own experiences and to develop sensitivity to others. Children may effortlessly abstract more grammar from such activities than through explicit and often boring grammar lessons.

Input-rich communicational environments are a prerequisite for language learning. Inputs include textbooks, learner-chosen texts, and class libraries, allowing for a variety of genres: print (e.g. Big Books for young learners); parallel books and materials in more than one language; media support (learner magazines/newspaper columns, radio/audio cassettes); and "authentic" materials.

On language evaluation, the NCF says that it need not be tied to "achievement" with respect to particular syllabi but must be reoriented to the measurement of language proficiency. Ongoing assessment could document a learner's progress through the portfolio mode. National benchmarks for language proficiency need to be evolved. The NCF also discusses the issue of English (along with mathematics) being a principal reason for failure at the Class X level.

Most language teachers associate the training of speech with correctness rather than with the expressive and participatory functions of language. The NCF takes cognizance of the fact that "talking in class has a negative value in our system, and a great deal of the teacher's energy goes into keeping children quiet, or getting them to pronounce correctly. If teachers see the child's talk as a resource rather than as a nuisance, the vicious cycle of resistance and control would have a chance to be turned into a cycle of expression and response. There is a vast body of knowledge available on how talk can be used as a resource, and pre-service and in-service

teacher education programmes must introduce teachers to this."

Teaching-learning material and activities should encourage small group talk among children and nurture their abilities to compare and contrast, to wonder and remember, to guess and challenge, to judge and evaluate. Listening resources and activities should focus on developing the ability to pay attention, to value the other person's point of view, to stay in touch with the unfolding utterance, and to make flexible hypotheses about the meaning of what is being said.

Storytelling, to the NCF, is appropriate not only for pre-school education, but continues to be significant even later. As a narrative discourse, orally told, stories lay the foundations of logical understanding even as they expand the imagination and enhance the capacity to participate vicariously in situations distant from one's life.

While reading is readily accepted as a focus area for language education, school syllabi are burdened with information-absorbing and memorizing tasks, so much so that the pleasure of reading for its own sake is missed out. Opportunities for individualized reading need to be built at all stages in order to promote a culture of reading, and teachers must set the example of being members of such a culture.

The NCF points out that most teachers often insist that children write in a correct way. The expression of their own thoughts and feelings through writing is not considered very important. Just as the prematurely imposed discipline of pronunciation stifles the child's motivation to talk freely, in his or her own dialect, for instance, the demand for writing in mechanically correct ways blocks the urge to use writing to express or to convey one's ideas. Teachers need to be persuaded and trained to place writing in the same domain as artistic expression, and to cease perceiving it as an office skill. During the primary years, writing abilities should be developed holistically in conjunction with the sensibilities associated with talking, listening, and reading. At middle and senior levels of schooling, note-making should receive attention as a skill-development training exercise. This

will go a long way in discouraging mechanical copying from the blackboard, textbooks and guides. It is also necessary to break the routinization of tasks like letter and essay writing, so that imagination and originality are allowed to play a more prominent role in education.

#### Why don't Children Learn to Read?

- Teachers lack basic pedagogic skills (understanding where the learner is, explaining, asking appropriate questions) and, an understanding of the processes of learning to read, which range from bottom-up processes such as syllable recognition and letter-sound matching, to top-down processes of whole-word recognition and meaning making from texts. They also often lack class-management skills. They tend to focus on errors or hard spots rather than on imaginative input and articulation.
- Pre-service training does not give the teacher adequate preparation in reading pedagogy, and neither does in-service training address the issue.
- Textbooks are written in an ad-hoc fashion, with no attempt to follow a coherent strategy of reading instruction
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially first-generation learners, do not feel

accepted by the teacher, and cannot relate to the textbook.

#### A Workable Approach to Beginning Reading

- The classroom needs to provide a print-rich environment, displaying signs, charts, work-organizing notices, etc. that promote 'iconic' recognition of the written symbols, in addition to teaching letter-sound correspondences.
- There is a need for imaginative input that is read by a competent reader with appropriate gestures, dramatization, etc.
- Writing down experiences narrated by children, and then having them read the written account.
- Reading of additional material: stories, poems, etc.
- First-generation school goers must be given opportunities to construct their own texts and contribute self-selected texts to the classroom.

From NCF 2005

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## Language and Dialect

*Rama Kant Agnihotri*



People 'know' quite a lot about the language(s) they speak. They 'know' how to put sounds together to make words and to put words together to make sentences that are always grammatical and acceptable; often they use language in nuanced and metaphorical ways. This knowledge, though extremely abstract, rich and complex is not conscious. This is true irrespective of whether you call what is acquired 'language' or 'dialect.' It is effortlessly

acquired by every child before the age of four without any explicit tutoring; though the normal processes of socialization are central to language acquisition. At some level people are also aware that without language, no systems of language or culture may exist. Yet the same people treat the issue of language with indifference and immaturity. For them, there is a fundamental difference between a 'pure and standardized' language and a 'locally spoken rustic' dialect.