



A study on English teaching learning method in a Hindi medium school in Nadia district of West Bengal

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Abstract

How do we empower the learner to become an active creator of knowledge and to acquire and develop new skills? What are the barriers in this process? These are the key questions that this paper tries to seek answers to. It focuses on one crucial barrier—language—and the way it governs the teaching-learning process. Specifically, the paper tries to illustrate ways in which a bias in favour of English medium poses serious problems for non-English medium students in accessing knowledge and adapting it to their needs. This paper also argues that at present a variety of languages are not considered which can have a meaningful role in redefining education and enabling the minds of the youth. This paper includes a study based on a sample survey of 52 students in a Hindi medium school and its analysis and implications for teaching-learning practices.

Keywords: knowledge, human capital, language, higher education, learning, cultural domination, vernacular, disconnect, three-language formula, cognitive growth

Introduction: Knowledge for whom?

When we raise the issue of knowledge-building in this country to solve the present problems of our generation and also of the future, the question that arises immediately is: knowledge for whom? Knowledge is not only an individual quest; it is also a social quest. Here, rather than going into a philosophical discussion on what constitutes knowledge, we relate knowledge to an expansion of capabilities and capacities to understand the social and natural world and to respond to it. This is especially relevant at a time when society is experiencing change at a rapid rate and new ideas, technologies and challenges are emerging on various fronts. In this sense, knowledge is basic human capital that is vital for social enrichment.

How do we empower a learner to become an active creator of knowledge and to acquire and develop new skills? What are the barriers in this process? This paper is about one crucial barrier—language—and the way it conditions the teaching-learning process. Specifically, this paper tries to illustrate ways in which a bias in favour of English medium poses serious problems in accessing knowledge and adapting it to local needs. At present there are a variety of language's which are ignored; these languages can have a meaningful role in redefining education and enabling the minds of the young.

It is widely perceived that today English is the language of knowledge most well suited to bringing the fruits of advancing frontiers in a globalize world within the grasp of Indians. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) notes in its report: NKC has also recognised the significance of language, not only as a medium of instruction or a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. An understanding and command over the English language is a most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School-leavers who are

not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. More often than not, teaching is in English. Even if it is not, in most subjects, books and journals are available only in English. And those who do not know English well enough find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations overall. This reality is not lost on our people, who recognise that the English language is a critical determinant of access to, and opportunities for a better life. Available information suggests that middle-income or lower income households spend a large proportion of their modest income on sending their children to relatively expensive English medium schools. Such educational opportunities for children are a priority that is almost at par with health care for the family. But there are a very large number of people who simply do not have the resources for such investment. The outcome is exclusion. We believe that inclusion is possible through public provision (Government of India 2009:27). Recognizing the barrier posed in accessing knowledge due to lack of competency in English, the NKC proposed certain steps that need to be taken to ensure that students in India acquire that competency from school onwards:

Language learning cannot be separated from, and must be integrated with, content learning. Therefore, English should also be used to teach some non- language, content subjects, starting from Class III in school (Government of India 2009:27).

In other words if the thirsty cannot come to the well, take the well to the thirsty!

However, the problem in this case lies in the fact that for a vast majority, English simply cannot be a language in which they can translate their thoughts and ideas. A learning which

cannot connect with the lived experiences of a learner, the way one interprets the world, must always have weak foundations. On the other hand, there are examples of countries like Korea, Japan and China which have achieved tremendous progress without depending on English. In this paper, we argue that without diminishing the value of English, we can enable the minds of the young better if we communicate to them in the language they understand best.

Review of literature

The issue of language and access to knowledge in ways that have contemporary resonance can be seen as early as 1813 when the East India Company decided to spend Rs 1 lakh for supporting education in India. It sparked a debate among Orientalists and Anglicists about the kind of knowledge that should be imparted to Indians. This debate involved two kinds of dilemma: a) whether knowledge should be indigenous or Western in content, and b) should the medium of instruction be English or a vernacular. The Macaulayan resolution on both these sets of alternatives created a framework whereby not only was Western knowledge given preference over indigenous knowledge, but also English was chosen as the medium of instruction. This essentially meant that it became the language of power and status. It became part of the civilizing mission ideology of the colonial apparatus. In his famous —Minute of 1835 Macaulay noted:

All parties seem to be agreed on one point, that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives... of India, contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them.

Similarly, the Wood's - Despatch of 1854 that lay down the British policy on education stated:

We must emphatically declare that the education which we desire to see extended in India is that which has for its object the diffusion of the improved arts, services, philosophy, and literature of Europe, in short, European knowledge (cited in Aggarwal 2009:15).

According to Jyotindra Das Gupta (1970:44) ^[4], in both education and law courts, language became a marker of two separate levels of social operation—the upper level reserved for English, the lower for the vernaculars. By the end of the nineteenth century, a serious quest had emerged among Indians to find alternatives to British claims of cultural superiority. This is evident in movements such as the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the dynamic figure of Swami Vivekanand and the emergence of a swadeshi ideology.

In post-independent India, the - three- language formula came to be outlined as a solution for retaining the advantages of English without compromising the stature of Hindi and regional languages. It emerged as a strategy and policy after years of debate that had earlier echoed prominently in the Constituent Assembly. Following these debates and its own discussions, the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), the oldest advisory body on education in India, devised the - three- language formula in its 23rd meeting held in 1956 (https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Z413%20EDB%20Section04_0.pdf) According to this

formula, at the middle and high school stages a set of three languages was to be taught that included the native or mother language, a regional language for Hindi-speaking areas and Hindi for non-Hindi speaking areas, and English or a modern European language.

The All India Council for Education recommended the adoption of the three language formula in September 1956. This recommendation was taken up in 1961 by a conference of chief ministers and given a concrete shape. This formula sought to resolve a complicated political problem that had arisen over the issue of language where the non-Hindi speaking states were reluctant to promote Hindi unilaterally. The 1968 National Policy on Education made this formula the cornerstone of the educational system as far as the medium of language for instruction at various levels was concerned. The 1968 policy states:

- The First language to be studied must be the mother tongue or the regional language.
- The Second language:
 - In Hindi-speaking States the second language will be some other modern Indian language or English, and
 - In non-Hindi-speaking States, the second language will be Hindi or English.
- The Third language:
 - In Hindi-speaking States, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language, and
 - In non-Hindi-speaking States, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language.

The national curriculum framework for school education:

A Discussion Document released on 1 January 2000, while reviewing the three language formula, states: -In a number of states/organizations/ boards, however, the spirit of the formula has not been followed and the mother tongue of the people has been denied the status of the first language... because of the changed socio-economic scenario, the difference between the second and the third languages has dwindled. The NCERT position paper observes:

But this formula has been observed more in the breach than in the observance. The Hindi-speaking States operate largely with Hindi, English, and Sanskrit, whereas the non-Hindi-speaking States, particularly Tamil Nadu, operate through a two-language formula, that is, Tamil and English. Still, many States such as Orissa, West Bengal, and Maharashtra among others implemented the formula (NCERT 2006: 13).

Proper implementation of three language formula would have enabled students to move from one level of linguistic competence to the second and third levels in a graded manner building on foundations developed at each level. India's linguistic diversity would then have become an asset rather than a hindrance in transmitting knowledge and creativity. This, however, has hardly happened.

In the *Position Paper of the National Focus Group on the Teaching of Indian Languages* developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the low proficiency in language of most school-leaving students was explicitly recognized:

Most children leave schools with dismal levels of language proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills, even in their own native languages. In addition to a variety of socio-political reasons that adversely impinge upon our educational system in general, some reasons that are primarily responsible for these low levels of proficiency include: lack of any understanding about the nature and structure of language and the processes of language teaching-learning, particularly in multilingual contexts; acute failure on the part of educational planners to appreciate the role of language across the curriculum in contributing towards the construction of knowledge; not paying enough attention to the fact that a variety of biases, including caste, race, and gender, get encoded in language; inability to appreciate the fact that language consists of much more than just poems, essays, and stories; unwillingness to accept the role of languages of the home and neighbourhood in cognitive growth and failure to notice that cognitively advanced language proficiency tends to get transferred across languages. It is becoming increasingly clear that linguistic diversity is as important for our survival as biodiversity (NCERT 2006: 4).

In the next section we build certain hypotheses about how language conditions the teaching-learning experience in Calcutta University.

Teaching practices in Central Model School, Kalyani, Nadia

Hypotheses

1. The pedagogical practices that have been in vogue in Central model school have an in built bias in favour of English which is a barrier for Hindi background students.
2. Resolving the issue of the language barrier is more than issue of creating textbooks and calls for new orientation towards knowledge and innovative teaching-learning practices.

Investigation Methodology

Due to paucity of time in carrying out more elaborate research, we relied on the questionnaire method and conducted a pilot study to elicit student responses to questions that highlight their own evaluation of the difficulties that they faced under the present system. The questions which were developed are given in the appendix.

Major findings

1. A majority of Hindi background students affirmed that they felt disadvantaged by pursuing education in Hindi medium.
2. Most of them felt that there was not enough learning material in Hindi to elaborate their understanding.
3. Almost all Hindi medium students confirmed that they had the motivation to read beyond the classroom and draw upon other sources of knowledge.
4. Most of the Hindi medium student's parents were also from Hindi medium backgrounds, had incomes less than Rs 2,00,000 per annum, and had themselves been educated in government schools.
5. The respondents had not read more books in their school course. Most had read less.
6. A significant percentage of the students said that they

clarified their doubts through books or from their friends, implying that they did not take their doubts towards teacher.

7. A greater percentage of students in Hindi were more confident in expressing their understanding in their own words as compared to English medium students who were less sure of their communication skills.
8. A significant proportion of Hindi medium students had difficulties in accessing English medium resources.
9. Most of the Hindi medium students were not justifying all the prescribed readings for a topic as given in the syllabus.
10. Reading magazines and journals was not a popular habit amongst most of the students.

Analysis and Results

This survey highlights some pressing concerns that show the ineffectiveness of the teaching-learning process under present pedagogical practices. The silver lining, however, is the fact that there is motivation and aspiration to learn, but this motivation is lost in the present educational system as it exists. It is evident that Hindi medium students are themselves aware that they are at a disadvantage as compared with English medium students in accessing knowledge. A glance at the prescribed readings for most of the courses shows the negligible presence of learning sources in the non-English medium. Most of these text books are translations under the auspices of the Directorate of Hindi Medium Implementation. A significant number of students from the Hindi medium considered these translations difficult to comprehend on account of their Sankritized vocabulary and idiom.

On the other hand, even the English medium students were not very confident of their abilities as far as expressing their understanding in their own words was concerned. In other words, the communication skills of even the English medium students were not fruitful. This gave rise to the practice of rote learning and a tendency to copy and paste paragraphs from books and readymade notes'. Innovation and cognitive development is thus considerably lost in this kind of a crucial situation.

It is also evident that there is much to be desired as far as the reading habits of students are concerned. Most of the respondents were found wanting in the culture of reading even for the basic prescribed texts. It is contended that this lack of culture of reading reflects not only linguistic problem but also a disconnect between teaching and learning that arises from a number of factors. The students do not feel motivated enough to engage with the subject that is being taught. This is more so in the social sciences and humanities streams. Elements of doing and hands on knowledge are missing in the syllabi which appear distant and abstract.

The role of a teacher in solving student's problems and his or her own ability to deal with the deficiencies displayed by students seems to be inappropriate. A significant percentage of the students did not take their difficulties to their teachers to clarify their doubts with him/her. A teacher's communication abilities and his/her ability to gauge the pressing difficulties of the students is an issue here.

Implications and Recommendations

1. To enable students and for redefining education so as to truly empower students and make them active agents in creating knowledge for change, it is important to deepen awareness about ways in which language governs the teaching-learning process. This has two basic aspects: a) linguistic: ways in which language structures the cognitive process and acts as a channel for transmission of knowledge, and b) social: ways in which education addresses the social and cultural environment of a student in which language functions and operates. For example, for many students the language of knowledge is far removed from the language they experience and readily understand.
2. There is an inadequate feedback mechanism and information on how students assess and evaluate the teaching-learning process. This lacuna is a disabling element in designing curriculum and orienting the process from the point of view of students. There is an urgent need to install a mechanism whereby such information and assessment can be made available.
3. The contemporary approach to meeting the needs of a majority of the learners, who are non-English medium learners, is both out-dated and inadequate. Refresher and orientation courses for teachers do not address the real issues that emerge out of classroom experience. There is a serious need for knowledge laboratories or institutional arrangements where teachers can continuously upgrade their abilities and become better equipped to deal with the needs of the students judiciously. Such knowledge labs can help in the continuous development of a whole gamut of learning, resource facilities for which are practically non-existent at present.
4. The approach to developing textbooks for students also needs to change. There needs to be greater seriousness towards this task. The learning material produced by the Directorate of Hindi Education is completely devoid of any visual references and is written in a manner which makes reading dull and void.
5. Serious thought needs to be given towards making dynamic the functioning of the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literatures in the school level. To give an example, students in the social sciences are hardly aware of intellectual traditions that connect with different disciplines in Gujarati, Tamil, Assamese, Bengali and other regional languages. A language also represents a whole cultural tradition that embodies intellectual, artistic and other creative endeavours. There is less than adequate exposure to such endeavours at present.
6. Successful models of transition from English-based learning to nativized learning in other countries can be valuable in dealing with similar problems in the Indian context. One of the most successful case studies is that of Malaysia (Puteh 2012)^[12].

Limitations and Future research possibilities

This paper is based on a sample survey that included 52 students of Central model school, Kalyani, Nadia. The findings are subject to the limitations of the small sample size of the data. The authors of this paper have been teaching in

Central model school for a considerable period of time and many of these findings are also corroborated by their own experiences.

A vast literature exists on education and pedagogical practices. The present literature review represents the historical context that frames the debate on language and knowledge. There is a need to factor in studies on educational psychology, linguistics and other disciplines for a more comprehensive study. This also points towards a comprehensive collaborative inter-disciplinary research that can probe different aspects of the issues raised in this paper.

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